

# REPRESENTATION

C. SONG JACKSON

for my family

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The problem derives from the very nature of words. They are symbols of meaning. But unlike mathematical symbols, the phrasing of a document, especially a complicated enactment, seldom attains more than approximate precision. If individual words are inexact symbols, with shifting variables, their configuration can hardly achieve invariant meaning or assured definiteness...A statute is an instrument of government partaking of its practical purposes but also of its infirmities and limitations, of its awkward and groping efforts.

—Felix Frankfurter

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If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music do not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly awarded. When punishments are not properly awarded, the people do not know how to move hand or foot.

—Confucius

He stood thus, silently biting his lips.

—Kafka

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## REPRESENTATION





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## 1.1

The bracing wind, sideways sleet sliced my cheeks as I stepped onto the ferry; we began moving, rocking and cutting through the whitecaps, my mother standing waving behind the mask of morning fog and

ice. By night, after hours of driving, I was back in the District—Washington—moving among the gray ghosts.

Days filing papers, evenings into nights drinking bourbon, reading briefs, bills, blogs. It was suddenly November, and I was walking over wet auburn leaves, coming home at two-thirty in the morning, thinking about fitness and natural selection and all that. A man lay hunched over a bench, just outside my apartment building, coughing; at first, I thought him drunk—then he looked up at me, and, for a moment, I thought him a mugger—but he only grinned, saying, “I forgot my keys—you mind?”

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I hesitated—then nodded, opening the entrance for us both. Digging into his pockets, he went fast into the elevator, yawning as the doors closed between us.

## 1.2

Coffee off Columbia Avenue—a shadow passes close against my periphery, sitting across the cast-iron table.

“Lyon,” he says, “thanks for the other night.”

“Sure,” I shrug, watching him as he sits, shifting his pants. He’s wearing a brown suit, fingerless gloves. He has the smell and

look of a homeless man—ragged shoes, the twisted flecked beard.

Moving to talk, he begins, “I’m—”

“Why don’t I buy you a coffee, breakfast?”

He considers—nods.

I wave over a waitress.

### 1.3

Often, the first thing I smell in the mornings is blood. I stand, swaddled, walk into the bathroom, open the cabinet, the medicine, and toss back a few pills. Then piss, come out, and make coffee—check email, the newspapers, blogs, weather.

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Frenetic medicated post-postmodern cyber-landscape engulf me, etc.

An email from a colleague working on 7757:

*How's this sound?*

*"Section 1102(k): The majority of Americans cannot communicate with each other. We propose to allow all American citizens the right to use the internet. Without the internet, Americans cannot pursue happiness. This means net neutrality is an internet system similar to the*

*interstate highway system, paving the way... ”*

*Early this morning, Ohio  
announced a bill for building a  
Federal internet infrastructure.  
Thought I'd give you a heads up.  
Noticed a throbbing in my glands  
last night—meningitis?*

No sign-off; no need—this is Syd  
Phillips—Sick Syd, some call him, or  
Mally—short for malingerer. He's always on  
about something having to do with his body  
being deathly ill, or near to it.

I respond:

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*Sounds lovely—especially your choice of the phrase “pursue happiness.” I’ll work on clarifying terms:*

*“happiness” is a state of being which can be pursued, yet never achieved.*

*On the way to happiness are the states: “joy,” “pleasure,”*

*“contentment,” &c. It is the job of the Federal Government to provide a clear pathway toward this pursuit.*

*This process includes both removing roadblocks and providing occasional transport toward that goal. As happiness can never be truly*

*achieved, only pursued, the  
Government's support of the  
individual is perpetual.*

Of course, it's not lovely—it's tripe.

But that's how it has to

start; you can't just come out and call things as they are—first, you have to say them obliquely, just to get them out of the way, so that they can later be edited, erased, and eventually replaced with more directly indirect language.

7577 began as a bill to lower prescription drug costs, titled tentatively, “A Bill to Lower the Cost of Prescription Drugs within the United States.” Then *California*



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and *New Jersey* got wind of it, sent word over to PhRMA, and that was that—the prescription drug part was cut out of the prescription drug bill. Now, I suppose, we were onto internet infrastructure—whatever that meant (or would come to mean).

## 1.4

Light rain, I grabbed the 42, taking it down to Center, riding the Metro on into Federal. On the crowded bus, standing, I lost myself in thoughts—looking over the other riders reading the paper, books, listening to music. I've always hated music.

When I was younger (and even sometimes now), I used to wish I would go deaf.

A thought interrupts—I call Rong.

“Yep.”

“Morning, Rong—question for you: what is net neutrality?”

“Ah,” she says—stalling, probably looking it up (I hear typing).

“What does it even mean?” I ask, giving her time.

“It means neutral. Everything’s neutral.” (Again, the patter of typing).

“What the hell does that mean, Rong?”

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“It means fucking equality, or some shit, ok? Fuckall if I know all that computer shit.”

“Well, what the hell is Mally playing at, then?”

“What’s he ever playing at, except getting sick? He’s got some lobbyists from F and G coming in, that’s all I know.”

“Today?”

“After lunch.”

“Alright, thanks.”

I hang up.

Climbing up out of the metro, I walk across the square, standing on the curb at the light, looking watching the people walking stepping onto a bus, a woman chatting with her friends, laughing, stopping when she sees me looking at her, our eyes locked. She gets onto the bus, following her friends, sitting and turning, looking out through the window at me—and then the bus is gone, moving downhill. Instinctively, I give chase for half a block—then stop short, turning to walk to work.

## 1.6

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I've never had any particular interest in politics. Democracy is bureaucracy. It was my second-cousin or grandmother (or aunt? I can't quite remember which relative it was) that got me this job. There is no crusading, of course, for truth or freedom, or any of that. Mostly, it's just lunches and paperwork—intermediaries meeting with functionaries (I, of course, am a shining unique flower).

Wednesday, I spend the morning hammering out the details of H.R.7742 (a Bill connected to green trash collection)—locked in a room with others of my ilk

(secretaries, lobbyists, aides), coming up with key literary passages, such as: “In Section 304(b), the word ‘waste’ will be replaced with the word ‘reclamation.’” More or less, it was like working behind the scenes on a sitcom.

Waste or reclamation—who can say?

The bowels of Congress, made of marble and oak. Lunch: I walked purposefully—head down (that Washington way of walking) —into the cafeteria, buying a tuna sandwich, tea. I sat at a round table, just behind a pillar, and looked over my work. Biting into the bread, I saw then that the tuna was brown—flecks of green and red.

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It tasted oily, gritty. I smushed the sandwich half into a ball and stuffed it into the corner of my mouth.

Chewing, my eye caught the back of the newspaper, the obituaries—the name, *Lyon*. A paragraph of text, a photograph.

On the way home, I bought a paper, confirming the news.

“I was born in Louisiana,” he’d said over breakfast, “about halfway between New Orleans and Hattiesburg.”

*Lyon Wade was born in Washington, D.C.*, read the newspaper.

An odd discrepancy, that.

## 1.7

After work, I go out for a drink, a small bar off U Street.

I reflect on the day's meeting.

"It doesn't matter what *net neutrality* really means," Mally had said, "don't get caught up on that—"

"I'm not caught up on anything," I said, calmly.

"Then what—what is it?"

"I'm just curious, is all."

At this point, one of the women from Corporation G leaned forward.



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“*Net neutrality*,” she said, firm fists on table, “means whatever we decide it means.”

“I know that, too,” I said, looking her straight on, “but you’re still not getting what I’m saying.”

None of them did—except maybe Rong; but Rong wasn’t there—she was locked away inside her phone.

On the way home, lost in thought, I saw a man again outside my building.

He looked up grinning—Lyon.

## 1.8

“Forgot my keys,” he said, “you mind?”

I let him in, following him into the elevator.

“Going up?” he asked.

I nodded, pressing a random button.

“I’m not dead,” he said, looking forward.

I looked at him—then down at my hands.

“I see that,” I said.

At the seventh floor, he stepped off, turning.

“How ‘bout a drink?” he asked.

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We were in his apartment, sitting drinking looking out the windows.

He was wearing a brown suit, brown glasses. Gloves—the fingers torn off.

The phone rang; he answered it.

“No—I’m alive alright,” he said, laughing, “reports of my death have been greatly—what’s that? No—yes I have it already, cut out—no, no need. Alright then, Walter, good evening.”

He shook his head, replacing the plastic within the cradle.

“My obituary,” he said, half-smiling,  
“a friend playing a joke.”

“Must’ve been a surprise,” I said,  
wondering, *A joke?*

He glanced across at me—then away,  
drinking.

“I feel like a ghost now,” he said. “A  
shadow on the wall.”

## 1.9

I stayed up late, writing.

*In Section 1102(k), “net neutrality”  
refers to the equality of internet  
access. All internet access will be  
freely distributed among both*

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*citizens and corporations. This policy will be spelled out further in Section 1414.*

*...*

*Section 1414*

*a) Net neutrality can be thought of as both a switch and a structure*

*b) The internet can be compared to the interstate highway system. All roads are equal.*

*c) Corporations cannot monopolize the internet, nor may they form a cartel.*

Meaningless notes—just to help me prepare for possible legislative maneuvers.

## 1.10

In bed at night, I always have plans—*grand life ideas*, whatnot. But then the day comes, and it's the same old pattern, and I forget it all—until again it's night and I'm between the sheets.

The day next, I returned to the busstop, waiting, hoping to see her; again she was there, standing, again talking with her friends. We saw each other seeing each other. Again, she got onto the bus, turning back to look out at me sitting there looking

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at her looking. In bed, that night, I was again thinking of her, those eyes looking back.

## 2.1

Words are my domain. Mally deals with the lobbyists and Congress; Rong checks the legal history—*the negative*. We work on the same floor in the Ford Building, Rong and I sharing a large room, while



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Mally is off on his own (this, so that he is able to entertain the politicians without us having to listen). A few times a week, we get together —usually with others present, as with the net neutrality question.

Mally regularly shuttles back and forth between Ford and the other Capitol buildings. Rong, when she's not at Ford, spends most of her time at either the Government Printing Office or the Law Revision Counsel.

When Rong and I meet, we talk about the *Code* (the U.S. Code of Laws), the *Stat* (U.S. Statutes at Large), *Code 2* (the

Code of Federal Regulations), or the *Register* (Federal Register). We deal with the past becoming present. We live in books and digital documents. Mally lives in spoken language—meetings and phone calls. He deals with the present becoming future—politics. We three argue over the present *qua* present.

## 2.2

“That’s a nice bit of work,” said Mally, coming into the room.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking up from my computer.

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“Net neutrality. But, seriously, when are you planning on working on it?”

I shrugged. “Like pharmaceuticals? I spent two weeks straight on that, Mally, and now it’s in the filing cabinet. ‘What’s the meaning of *pharmaceutical*?’ you asked. ‘What’s the meaning of *drug*?’ ‘What does *generic* mean?’”

Rong—playing with her phone—laughed.

“Peew,” she said, briefly lifting up her head, holding her nose.

I smiled.

*PHW = Public Health and Welfare—*  
a meaningless catchall *Code* term (when we don't know what something is, we call it PHW —pronounced variously “P-H-W,” “phew,” and “peew”).

Mally sat on the corner of my desk, his right leg dangling.

“I don't think F and G liked you very much,” he said, tapping a pencil against my monitor.

“Lobbyists have nothing to do with meanings, Mally.”

He frowned, watching me type.

“I don't like that nickname,” he said, after a time.

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It was this sort of thing, day in, day out: Mally trying to get me to see the political side of things; Rong burrowing inside either her phone or the *Code/Code 2*; me daydreaming as I made meaningless notes, pitter-pattering the keyboard.

## 2.3

The boredom hours, ever between one-fifteen and three-thirty. I waste time clicking, calling, writing, standing to drink coffee, looking out the window—but nothing comes to make the clock move.

Around two or so, I grabbed Rong and made her take a walk with me. She was used to this.; we never minded walking far for lunch (in Washington, you can't really ever get anywhere if you aren't willing to walk).

Across the Mall to Pennsylvania. Somewhere along there, we slid into a café.

The coffee tasted burnt, so I just sat there holding onto the cup.

“What’re you doing this weekend?” I asked her.

She shrugged. “Bob wants to go to a Skins game.”

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Rong continued talking. I was outside, looking through the window, my mind empty, filled only with clouds of sounds—chatter, clinking cups, cars passing, horns.

“Mm,” I said, catching a pause; then she was off again, talking while I tried to fend off the growing numbness in my head.

Bored now even with my own boredom.

It was a Thursday—a phone call: “A Mr. Knox for you,” Kelly’s voice coming through the speaker.

“Who’s he with?” I asked.

“Says you know him.”

“I don’t,” I said.

Kelly rung off—a pause.

“Says you’re old friends,” she said, coming back, “that you might’ve forgotten.”

I thought this over—of course, I could’ve forgotten, but it was more likely that this was a ruse.

“Alright,” I said, pushing the button.

“Mr. Knox?”

“Yes—is this Mr. Gray?”



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“Yes.”

“Mr. Gray—you don’t know me—I know I said that to the woman, your assistant, but, you see, I have to meet with you—it’s regarding upcoming legislation and—”

“That’s Mr. Phillips’ area,” I said, holding out my elbow, ready to hang up.

“No—I don’t want Mr. Phillips—you see—Mr. Gray, I need to see you in person—this is—Mr. Phillips is no good, you see—”

“Have you talked with Mr. Phillips?”

“Mr. Phillips is no good, you see—  
Mr. Gray, if I could just meet with you in  
person, I know that—”

“What is this regarding, Mr. Knox?”

“It’s—it’s something that is better  
talked about—if I could just see you in  
person, Mr. Gray, then—”

“I understand that, Mr. Knox, it’s  
just that that is Mr. Phillips’ area. You see,”  
I said, unconsciously mimicking his speaking  
patterns, “I only deal with upcoming  
legislation through Mr. Phillips. He brings it  
to me, and we look at it together. Without  
Mr. Phillips, I wouldn’t know where to  
begin.”

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“Mr. Gray, I need to see you in person—this is, believe me, you will—if I could just see you!”

I held the phone away—looking around the room: the window, the walls, Rong talking with one of her assistants.

Policy is that you do not meet with them. If you do not know them, you do not see them. Only Mally meets with them, and Mally only meets with people he knows. Mally knows who to know and how to go about knowing others. Policy says that if someone says they know you, and you don't know them, *then you don't know them.*

They may know you, but you don't know them.

But maybe I did know him?

My eyes caught the monitor—the screensaver slowly scrawling the words “I’m bored,” over and over, filling the screen.

*I-‘m b-o-r-e-d.*

It was boredom, then, that decided it. I knew, really, that I didn’t know him—that likely Mally had turned him away, off down some cul-de-sac. But I was bored.

“Alright, Mr. Knox,” I said, “When would you like to meet?”

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Oysters, tuna—12<sup>th</sup> Street, the Center. Mr. Knox was wearing an expensive suit with sneakers. Neon stripes ran down along the laces, crisp white on the bottoms.

He was young enough so that I immediately thought of him as *young*—a faux-hawk flattened, no doubt for my benefit. He had some idea of me before we met, that much I could see simply from the way he shook my hand—two-handed—and looked into my eyes, awestruck. He was courting me—a lobbyist.

Mr. Knox talked the entire meal. About halfway through, I realized that I had

no idea of who he was, where he was from, or why we were meeting. And then it was over, and I was back at Ford, none the wiser of his intentions. It was almost as if that urgent phone call had never taken place.

“Mr. Knox,” I’d said, giving one last attempt at pinning him down, “when you called me, your voice—you sounded as if it were almost a matter of life and death?”

We were standing outside the restaurant, waiting for the valet to hail us each a cab. I was a little drunk, the Sauvignon Blanc yet rolling around my head.

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Mr. Knox turned away briefly to tip the young man, then turned back to me, his face a wide set of teeth.

“Mr. Gray,” he said, taking my hand as my cab pulled up, “it *was* life and death—and it still is.” He opened the door, giving the driver my address as I sat inside.

“But what is it?” I asked.

But it was too late; he’d closed the door, and was gone—the cab smooth moving down 14<sup>th</sup> Street, toward Constitution.

No dinner—my belly full—I went up and sat with Lyon. We drank. He asked me about my childhood, and I told him some stories.

After I'd finished a few tales, he looked at me and asked, simply, "Did you have any black friends growing up?"

"No," I said, sipping, shrugging, not having to think it over, "not really."

He thought about this for a while, remaining silent, drinking.

## **2.7**

Fast, I'd gotten into the habit of leaving early in the mornings, taking the bus,



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the metro, so that I could sit outside and watch the buses coming and going—hoping to see her again. It was perhaps a week or two of this before I even realized what I was doing. Somehow, I'd convinced myself that the reason I had to leave early was so that I had time to mentally collect myself before work, sitting drinking coffee in the park, across from the buses unloading and departing.

### 3.1

In the summers, I used to go live with my cousins, my aunt and uncle. I was all bones as a boy, which, for some reason, endeared me to fat kids. No, that's not right—it was the other way around: I was

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drawn to them. I was curious, trying (and ever unable) to figure out why *they* were fat and why *I* was skinny.

I would watch them, taking measure, seeing how much they ate, setting it against my own eating: their eating schedule, my eating schedule. Later (toward the end of high school, into college), this curiosity was realized as a passion for genetics.

My cousins—Josh and Ben—would pull me out into nature, away from the television, books. They liked to explore. Ben was stronger than either of us, so we usually

ended up doing what he wanted. Ben had an obsession with crayfish. We'd lean over the creek, looking down through the water—there: a movement—*Quick, grab it, pull it out!*—a tiny little lobster. I thought at first that they were aliens (too many science fiction books read).

## 3.2

Net neutrality was over with. In the end, we called it “internet freedom”. My head was still filled with the terms “internet architecture,” “protocol,” “cyber-infrastructure,” “packets,” “VoIP,” and the like, when Mally took us out for a

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celebratory late-Friday lunch. One moment, it seemed like I'd been studying computer jargon, and would continue to do so, my whole life. But then it was gone—finished. An Act now—sent over to Rong and the coders.

### 3.3

Monday—sitting drinking coffee.

Cold—wind chilling my head.

The bus coming, stopping, loading.

She's trotting, crossing—but she's too late,  
the bus grinding away.

She walks back to the stop, and I can see her shivering.

Bending her head, pulling the coat close.

I walk across the square, coming from behind, the wind rolling as I step under the metal roof. She looks up at me, sees that it's me—for a moment, I'm wondering how she will react—and smiles.

“Cold!” she says.

Those eyes, up close.

My brain is frozen—my jaw.

Then, somehow, I smile.

As the bus is coming, she looks again at me, says, “Bye.”

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## 3.4

Ben and Josh, their parents had to go visit relatives on my Uncle's side, people I didn't know. They'd asked me to come, but I felt awkward and out of place—jealous even in seeing Josh palling around with cousins from that other side. So I stayed at the house, my Mom confirming that I was old enough to stay alone—"For a few hours," she said, talking to both my aunt and I on the line, "he'll be fine—keep out of trouble for your aunt and uncle, Fox."

Left alone, I explored their old house. Beginning first, naturally, with my aunt and uncle's bedroom. A long bed with massive pillows, tall spiraled posters narrowing toward the ceiling. The drawers —nothing. Boring old clothes. The closets—shoes, belts, ties.

The bedside table—a small cherry rolltop desk. It took me a while to figure out how to open it; there was a hidden catch, wooden, along the bottom. Then—*slap*—the front went up. Sitting there: a book, a pen, a notepad, a pair of black glasses, a box of condoms. I opened box, pulling out a packet—examining it (I didn't know what it



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was). I counted inside the box—nine packets. I slipped a packet into my pocket, closed the desk, the bedroom door, and went back downstairs to read.

## 4.1

Mr. Knox called again, and again we went out to lunch; and again, I failed to determine either who he was or for whom he worked.

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“It *is* life and death—I assure you, Mr. Gray,” was all he would say.

And he was on to the next thing, talking about the weather, or sports, or something else topical.

Waiting for the cab, he again shook my hand (using two hands), smiling, thanking me.

“May I call upon you again, Mr. Gray?”

*Sure, ok—why not?*

I certainly had no illusions about all this. Riding back to work, my head again cloudy from the wine, I worked it all out: he

wanted something from me, and was waiting until I was ready. He was saving me for something important—a big client. A key piece of legislation. If I had to guess, I would even have gone so far as to say that he had nothing lined up for me; rather, he was simply paving the way—clearing the deck, setting up the dominoes, that sort of thing. Building a relationship. There was no *it*; *it* was a cipher, a placeholder until the highest bidder came along.

Well, that was too bad. I had made no commitments, no promises. In fact, I'd straight-out asked him what he wanted, and he'd not answered. So that was that, as far as

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I was concerned. Was I to feel indebted to some sleazy lobbyist? No—quite the other way around. I enjoyed the idea of eating his meals whilst knowing that they would bring him nothing in return.

## 4.2

The Wednesday meeting. Six of us sitting around a table: Mally in the center; Greg, his assistant, to his left; then Rong; then Nicholas, her assistant; then Me; then Carrie, the factotum.

“Before we begin,” says Mally, “I should warn you that I’m just getting over the flu. So stay clear, alright?”

“Ok—so, the new thing—as I’m sure you’re aware, if you read the news, is Alzheimer’s. Has anyone seen that new movie—what’s it called? Nicholas—you?” Nicholas shaking his head, “I know, it looks pretty horrible—but it’s created a media firestorm—just last night I saw two special news reports on current Alzheimer’s research—and we now have all these Boomers getting old, so it’s coming with force now, the media, our friends in the dome, and I’ve been hearing chatter now for

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weeks from my lovely little bees down on K and in the Center, right?” here Mally looks quickly at Greg, then around the room, putting both his palms flat on the table—this was Mally at full force, at his best, “So,” he says, “this is big, alright? This is like Nixon and Cancer, that sort of thing—‘War on Alzheimer’s,’ right?”

“We already fund Alzheimer’s, don’t we?” I asked.

“Fuckall if I know,” said Mally, “but we’re going to find out, that’s for sure. Carrie, you’ll have to go over and see NIH—is there a NIH-Alzheimer’s?”

“Aging, I think,” said Rong.

“Well, aging is too broad,” said Mally, “they’ll be forming a new NIH—Alzheimer’s, just like Cancer. See what’s involved with that, Carrie.”

Carrie nodding.

That was all I needed—for the rest of the meeting, some two hours, I crossed my arms, put chin against chest, and hibernated.

## 4.3

*Sally* was the name of the film—one of those touching mawkish portraits of a woman holding her palm against her cheek, losing her memories, her relationships with



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her children, her loved ones, her identity. I went to the theater alone, sitting and crying, hating myself for crying at such stupid sentimental schmaltz.

*Like the War on Cancer*—but what is *cancer*? What does *cancer* mean? What are the hallmarks of cancer?

“Cancer” is not one thing—it is many. A broken cell death mechanism—“apoptosis”. The damn things won’t die, so they—by default—multiply. Broken how? Why? Molecular mechanism. Genetics, etc. Mutation.

Why? And why are all these different causes categorized under the umbrella term *cancer*? Funding—cancer has its own institution—an *Institute of Health*, this established even before Nixon's *war*.

Beginning list of terms:

“Institute” —

“War” —

“Alzheimer's” —

“disease” —

“illness” —

“degenerative” —

“dementia” —

“aging” —

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“memory” —

“long-term memory” —

“episodic memory” —

“sensorimotor memory” —

“fact memory” —

The more I read, the more I came to feel that *Alzheimer's* itself was something undefinable (of course, I say that about most everything)

—difficult for years even to diagnose.

## 4.4

Alzheimer's is covered by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Each of the heads of these organizations had been meeting already with various Representatives and, in one case, a Senator. Mally had set up a mid-week meeting which was to include these three figureheads' respective representatives, but I wanted first to see them alone, without any politicians or lobbyists around.

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“Three things,” said NINDS, holding up her fingers, “neurofibrillary tangles, amyloid plaques, and memory loss.”

We were sitting in my office.

“Current theories,” said NIMH, “but—yes, those three fit the general consensus.”

“As of now,” said NIA.

I was taking notes. I’d asked Rong to let me have the office to myself, a not unusual request. Our office had a small roundtable, usually set up in a far corner of the room, covered in working drafts. Kelly had had the table moved to the middle of the

floor, across from the center window, so that we might have light coming in over the wood.

NIMH, a man, was to my left; NIA, also a man, was to my right; and NINDS, a woman, was across from me. In the course of our conversation, I noticed that NINDS and NIMH both treated NIA as if he were a little sibling, a small sister Institute; yet, I knew that NIA received the bulk of Alzheimer's funding.

"I'll ask you later," I said, trying to gather my thoughts, "to provide detailed studies and analysis of both neurofibrillary tangles and amyloid plaques—you can send

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them over to Kelly. You say that the most recent studies see these two as the primary cause—or are they more like signs than causes?”

“Both,” said NIA.

“I’d like to tell you, Mr. Gray,” said NIMH—leaning forward, conspiratorially, “that I’ve been meeting with a certain Senator in regard to this legislation, and I do believe that it is moving forward.”

I nodded. “That’s fine—are there any other causes?”

NIMH sat back, looking disappointed.

“The hot new thing,” said NINDS, smiling, eager to please, “in neurobiological research these days is *protein folding*.

Everyone wants to know about protein folding—what it is, how it works, what it means when a protein folds incorrectly—why.” She was folding her hands — lecturing; yet I could see that she was passionate about the subject.

“The truth is, Mr. Gray,” she continued, “that this is a very new field— young. We don’t really know how or why proteins fold. But we do know that it is important. And we know that when they misfold, that misfolding causes something to



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go wrong. In BSE, Mad Cow disease, the proteins turn into zombies—prions. These prions take over other proteins and transform them, making them misfold and also turn into prions.

“Alzheimer’s is also caused by misfolded proteins. It is my belief that understanding this process is the key to understanding—and perhaps someday curing—this horrible disease. Quite frankly, I believe that we would all be better served by a Protein Folding Institute, getting at the root cause, than by an Alzheimer’s Institute.”

She finished. We other three waited for her to continue, but it was over. I realized at that moment—during the pause—that these three figures also were, in their own way, politicians—fighting for territory, the future. They each wanted Alzheimer’s (funding) as their own. They really were no different than any of the others I saw coming through the office week to week, month to month, year to year.

An idea came to me. “Let me ask you this,” I said, looking at them each in turn, “why isn’t it that the NIH organizes small ‘mini-institutes’, or research-initiatives—whatever you might call them —

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around each disease? Why isn't there a group, for instance, that works together, taking leading researchers from each relevant institute to study *COPD*, or *addiction*—things like that?”

“We do do that, occasionally,” said NINDS. “There was a group that got together to look at *stem cells* once.”

“And now,” said NIMH, “there’s a group looking at *obesity*.”

“But it is the exception,” I said, “not the rule.”

They nodded.

But the meeting, effectively, was over. I'd not gotten what I wanted out of them, but that was to be expected. They had each come to make their respective political cases, better suited to the world of Mally.

## 4.5

It was a process all too familiar, even unknowingly (after the fact) a ritual: Mally brought in a new piece of legislation, excitement was in the air, and even I felt the flush—soon teeth deep in researching Alzheimer's—*here is something*, I was thinking, *that actually means something, something that can help people, even save*

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*lives, change families—something human;*  
but it was only weeks before when in came  
the zombies—the politicians blubbering, the  
legislative assistants humming, the  
bureaucrats muddying, even the research  
scientists and charities gobbling for their  
piece of the pie.

Boredom—ritual—reasserted  
supremacy.

## 5.1

It was late January—Friday, around five. I was thinking of going home. I'd spent the day working on H.R. 202, the Alzheimer's legislation, what we were now

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calling the National Alzheimer's Act, when Mr. Knox was rung through.

"Mr. Gray," he said.

"Yes."

"I wonder if you might be free this evening—it is most urgent."

*Most urgent* was Mr. Knox's hammer—everything else in life was a nail.

## 5.2

The restaurant was crowded—no room even to enter the front door; a long line of fur coats and trenches spilling out onto M Street. Taillights of cars bounced

down toward Key Bridge, pausing for laughing pedestrians to cross, elongating the viscous flow of traffic. Mr. Knox knocked against the glass, smiling as he caught my eye—then waving for me to come inside, pointing to the front door. I squeezed through the crowd, elbowing a few outraged stomachs.

“So good to see you, Mr. Gray,” he said, reaching out his two hands to shake my one.

He pulled me across the room, talking as we weaved through the tables, my hipbone hitting the backs of chairs.



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“I want you to meet a friend of mine,” he was saying, “a close friend, in fact,” as we reached the table—seated there, one of the ugliest women I have ever seen, “Mrs. Smithson.”

I leaned over, taking Mrs. Smithson’s hand, smiling.

“A pleasure,” I said, hearing myself sound old-fashioned. *But she looked old-fashioned*, I later told myself.

“This, of course,” said Mr. Knox, “is Mr. Gray.”

Mrs. Smithson was the daughter of someone *important* (Mr. Knox later always emphasized the word) who, in turn, was the son of someone else *important*. I had no inkling of what the word meant. Was her grandfather a robber baron? Did he wear a monocle?

Now, in her family's name, Mrs. Smithson spent her time performing various charitable acts.

"I've come, Mr. Gray," she said, "to tell you about my mother." Here, she cast a glance at Mr. Knox who, not-so-circumspectly, nodded. On instinct, I sat up straight.

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“*The Lady*,” she began, “which everyone called her, was, as we said in those days, an old battleaxe. Do not misunderstand me, Mr. Gray—I adored my mother, but only as one would a work of art. There was no affection there.”

At this point, the waiter came by, bringing menus—little leather things. We looked them over and ordered.

“*The Lady*,” continued Mrs. Smithson, as if the interruption had not occurred, “did not, as I said, suffer fools gladly. She had a strong temperament,

and—I will tell you an illustrative story, if you will permit me.”

I smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Gray. When I was sixteen—a plump, rose-cheeked thing, scared of boys—I had a girlfriend. Hannah, her name was. A smart girl—too smart for *The Lady’s* liking. Hannah had gotten it into her head that she and I should take my father’s car for a joyride. It was a stupid idea, but I worshipped Hannah and went along with just about anything she schemed.”

The waiter came, bringing drinks, strange crackers.

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“We took the car out to the country, had a picnic, and came home. No one was any the wiser. I was relieved.”

Mrs. Smithson here sipped her drink—then looked at Mr. Knox. I took the opportunity to examine one of the crackers—long and greenish, covered in small seeds.

“Then, a few weeks later, Hannah did not come to school. Then, the next day, she did not come. After a week, I began to worry—I went to Hannah’s home. ‘Hannah’s been transferred, dear,’ said her mother, ‘didn’t you know?’”

With a quick flick of the wrist, Mrs. Smithson finished her drink, looking toward the waiter.

“I was a very dumb girl,” she said, “I did poorly in my studies—but I knew what had happened. *The Lady* had worked her magic. That’s how she always did things—so cunning, so crafty, that you couldn’t see a trace of her handiwork. I only knew because I knew her, and because I cared so much for dear Hannah.”

The waiter came, bringing our meals. We opened napkins, took hold of forks.

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“Why did you tell me that story, Mrs. Smithson?” I asked, biting into a chunk of tenderloin.

Mrs. Smithson, I should say, was a tall woman—draped in purple, soft rolling down her arms. She had the face of an orangutan —her cheek flaps having grown larger, I supposed, with old age. When she spoke, she began always with an affected air, as if she were quite above it all, I dare say, my dear sir, good fellow; but, as she continued, she sounded more like a woman raised near New York. When I thought of her later, she always appeared to me as like

an actress playing Lady Macbeth who, as the play wore on, quite forgot that she was Scottish, and ended up speaking like a girl from Hoboken.

“*The Lady*,” she said, “is no longer a battleaxe. She is buttercream, Mr. Gray.” Here, a dramatic pause—looking first at Mr. Knox. “My mother suffers from Alzheimer’s disease. It has transformed her from a strong, cunning woman, into a doddering child, distracted by bees. I came here, Mr. Gray, to ask for your help.”

I am not so quick on my feet (I’m more of a plodding thinker), but I was yet sharp enough to realize that asking, “Why



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me?” or “What can I do?” would have been superfluous. In that Mrs. Smithson was coached (or at least in cahoots) with Mr. Knox, I assumed that she already had her own view of my abilities—and that, thus, any protestation on my part would have been for naught.

Mr. Knox had an idea of me—of who I was, of what I could do. To my mind, that image was not steeped in reality; but he was not to be dissuaded. It was evident that Mrs. Smithson shared Mr. Knox’s views.

“What,” I said to them, trying to find a middle ground, a way to move the

conversation forward, “do you want from me?”

## 5.5

I felt like walking. Cold weather stays so briefly in Washington, so that I never get enough of it. September is yet summer; October and November provide ersatz Autumn; then December and January come—cold weather!—but it is here and gone; March brings rain into April.

The streets were empty—too cold for tourists, even also for locals. From December until mid-March, the streets of the District are often empty. I relish those quiet

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sidewalks, the blue blown air turning ears red.

## 5.6

The building I lived in was red brick and steel. I found it through Mally—this, a year or so after I'd started working.

“I hear you're looking for a place,” he'd said, coming into my office.

At that time, I had my own little closet-office, tucked down the hall. No windows, and next to the bathroom. I didn't really know Mally too well—only what I'd heard from my predecessor (a man in his

seventies, dressed always in crisp blue suits) on his way out. Fred, his name was—Fred Wilson. He was standing with his coat draped over his arm, looking around the main office, as if he were surveying it for memory—absorbing the past, storing it for the future. Coming back to the now, he looked at me—slowly narrowing his eyes.

“Beware the blooming rose” he said.

At the time, I had scant idea to neither whom nor what he was referring.

“Yes, Syd,” I said, glad to have company in my little cell. “Why—what’ve you heard?”

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Syd sat on my desk, pulling on the bottom of his pants.

“A classic building—good location—great price. You interested?”

“Where exactly?”

“*The Meld.*”

“The Meld?”

“Yes,” he said, crossing his arms, “a good neighborhood—it’s a rectangle between 14<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> and between T and Corcoran.

*The Meld.*”

Each time he said the name of this neighborhood—quite mellifluously—a butterfly landed on his face. I knew I had to

do anything I could to stop him from saying it again.

“*The Meld*,” he said again, flapping his wings. And slowly, looking at him, I began to grasp the meaning behind Fred’s caution.

## 5.7

Coming home to my building, I thought over the dinner.

*Mr. Gray, your help—that’s all we’re asking for, nothing more.* Mr. Knox and his whitestrip-smile, oleaginous hair—combed this evening, I’d noticed, neatly to the side, an old-fashioned look. I glanced over my

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one brick wall, turning to look out through my plate glass windows.

*The Meld.* I was only ever to hear that name through Mally's voice, even in memory, in thoughts; Mally standing there, while in the background was my grandmother, playing pinochle with her friends—"Count the melds," she'd say, in Mally's voice, over coffee and sandwiches, gossip. *No*, I thought, *I could never live in there.* Besides—I couldn't afford it. Instead, I had Mally point me to another area—another neighborhood, preferably one not within walking distance.

## 6.1

It is quite an odd city, where during happy hour people talk legislation and speeches, fundraising events and committee hearings. They pride themselves as having their feet on the ground. A practical city. A



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realistic city. As well, of course, a transient city. They come with their suitcases full of ideals—*we are pragmatic*, they think to themselves. And they leave two, five, ten years later covered in dust.

I've never had any ideals except words themselves—language. Language is what makes us human. Language defines each culture. We use words to construct ourselves; words are the cells of consciousness. The changing meaning of a word corresponds to the fluctuations of a culture. The same word may have different meanings across different cultural groups; or

the same word may have different meaning within the same cultural group over a period of time. The meanings of words change—that is in their very nature. To try and hold words into place is to fight an illusory battle.

## 6.2

Words are mutable things, twisting and turning in the vocalized air; you try to grab them, pin them down—sliding through your fingers, like drunken memories; and memories they are—both individual and cultural. A word is a—see that? I can't get away from metaphors. I was going to write that a word is a photograph, but that

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metaphor is lacking. We need words, of course, to pick apart the concept of *word*. What is *word*-ness? What makes a word a word?

Index, icon, symbol—that, the old distinction drawn. But pinning down words is just what you shouldn't try to do. Words only make sense in the flow of language—context. Thus the inherent paradox of my profession. I give meaning to words, both within and outside of that context.

Take the word “apple”. A word points—it is demonstrative, indexical. “Apple” points to a real apple in the real

world. Or, alternately, “apple” points to *the idea* of an apple. “Apple” is a symbol. A word is a representation.

Or, let’s take a more recent example from my work—a practical example, with real-world consequences. The two similar names: “corn sugar” and “corn syrup.” They sound so alike, don’t they? *A meaningless distinction*, you may say—*a semantic quibble*. Yet over these two designations a fierce debate ensued, pitting lobbyists against lobbyists (Corn Growers against Environmentalists), politicians against delegates and representatives. The name “corn syrup,” over the years, has acquired a

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negative connotation. Sssss—yr—up is sluggish, viscous, oozing. Sugar is bright clean crisp! *Sugar* sounds natural, healthy; while *syrup* sounds engineered, fake—bad. That makes all the difference in the world. Jobs—livelihoods—nutrition—they all depend upon which word is chosen. Which word is correct? What do we mean by “correct”? The war is over context—who decides it? The historians? Lobbyists? Politicians? Voters? Institutions? Administrative agencies?

## 6.3

People used to die of old age. “Old age” was a catchall term, both covering over and perpetuating a cultural blindspot. In fact, people were dying of a wide variety of ailments; those ailments just were not yet discovered—named, defined. At the time, we might have called those ailments “Old Age type 1,” and “Old Age type 2,” etc (although, it probably would’ve been in Latin: *Senex, type 1; Senex, type 2*).

Buildup—that’s what kills people. Buildup of lipids: heart attack; buildup of cells: tumors—cancer; buildup of beta amyloid: Alzheimer’s.

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Over time, each type of Old Age garnered its own new term—its own categorization and study. *Cancer* was likely one of the first of these names; and now cancer, in turn, acts also as a catchall term; and, again, we have various “types” of cancer: “lung cancer,” “prostate cancer,” and so on. Someday, we might consider each of these its own separate disease.

If we don’t come up with a name for something, does it still exist? Yes, of course it exists, subsumed under another name, another category—another *word*. Imagine, for example, that we only had the word,

“human,” without the words “male” and “female.” Would this mean that males and females did not exist? “I am *human type 1*,” we might say, “while that thing over there is *human type 2*.” Eventually, we would tire of this laborious way of talking. Creating new words is a kind of linguistic shortcut.

“Heart attack” also used to be subsumed under that heading, “Old Age.” In fact, we might say that a heart attack is connected to old age; it is “Old Age type 1”—the most common way of dying (cancer, then, would be *Old Age type 2*). Heart attacks, even until the late-20<sup>th</sup> Century, were considered inoperable, a natural way of life



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(or death, as it were). *Stroke* might be called “Old Age type 3”. Then, somewhere down the line—perhaps “Old Age type 5”—we would find Alzheimer’s.

Is there only 1 type of Alzheimer’s? Might we find: “Alzheimer’s type 1,” and “Alzheimer’s type 2,” etc, someday? Only a National Alzheimer’s Institute seems well enough suited to pursue such questions. And who better to run the NAI than the National Institute on Aging (Old Age)?

## 7.1

In Washington, that symbolic city, protests are a weekly (often, daily) activity. They become routine—boring, an inconvenience even. Those living near train-tracks are not awakened by the whistle at

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night. *Another protest—what this time?*  
Each week brings new crowds—anger and hope, placards and posterboard. Abortion, immigration, cancer, gay marriage, health care, corporate greed, homelessness, taxes, wars, multiple sclerosis, banking regulation, the Middle East, nuclear power, Falun Gong, oil, worker's rights, voting rights, the national debt...

On my way walking to work, I came up to a crowd marching, holding up signs. Pushing through, I made my way to the metro. Coming out, I saw a new crowd, marching, holding up signs.

“What’s this for?” I asked aloud.

A woman in front of me turned, a foot from my face. “We want justice!” she yelled.

“Justice for what!” I yelled in turn.

“Justice for human rights!”

“Human rights where!”

“Justice for the world!”

“For where in the world, specifically!”

But she’d moved on, following the crowd.

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I caught a few signs, but they said only things like: *JUSTICE!* and *HUMAN RIGHTS!*

## 7.2

Exiting the elevator, I ran first into Greg—Mally's assistant.

“Morning, Mr. Gray.”

“Morning, Greg,” I said. “What’s this protest about?”

“The one on the Mall?”

We were suddenly jogging down the corridor. The only way for Greg and

Mally to walk was briskly. As if some wind were always pushing them from behind.

“Well, I think it’s all around,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

He nodded. “It started uptown, came down Pennsylvania, and now they’re on the Mall.”

“What for?”

“Animal rights?”

I stopped outside the bathroom. “Animal rights? But the signs said *human* rights.”

Greg shrugged, continuing down the hall. “Don’t ask me,” he said, “maybe they think animals are human or something.”

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## 7.3

“You didn’t read the whole sign,”  
said Mally.

I’d been sitting in the cafeteria,  
behind my pillar, when Mally sat across from  
me, slapping down his tray.

“What sign?” I asked—catfish  
between my teeth.

Mally was looking at my tray.

“You eat that?” he asked. He was  
rubbing his throat.

I looked at his looking—then  
down at my food.

“Last week the tuna was bad, so I thought I’d try something new.”

“Well, try the roast beef. Or salad. That fish is disgusting.”

Mally’s tray was holding a tomato salad, fruit juice, and a roll. He stabbed a tomato.

“It was two signs,” he said, biting the tomato. “The first half said, ‘human rights,’ and the second sign had an equals sign and said, ‘animal rights.’ It’s an animal rights protest.”

We ate. He rubbed his throat.



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“But what do they want?” I asked, a few minutes later —mostly out of boredom.

Mally was looking over my shoulder; I turned to see a group of people sitting talking.

“New legislation,” said Mally.

I turned back to see him finishing the roll.

“What legislation?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what, really—legislation is legislation. They just want something doing with animal rights

passed. Maybe something to do with genetic engineering—or lab testing.”

He stood to go, again looking behind me, across the room.

“We’ll start on something by the end of the week,” he said.

## **7.4**

Mally was always bright red springtime, bluebirds and bullshit. Ginger and clover. It was odd to think of it, but I’d never before seen him disconcerted. I turned in my seat, looking again at the crowd across the room: a man, a woman, a woman, a

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woman. The man was standing, his right foot on the bench seat of the table.

Had I seen them before? The women were sitting, facing the man, looking up at him. They were laughing now, the man loudest. A hissing, coming out of the sides of his cheeks. I pulled out my phone and took a picture.

## 7.5

“No—don’t recognize them,” said Rong. She was playing with her glasses—then pushing the buttons on my phone.

She handed it back to me.

“That’s a piece of shit—buy a new one,” she said.

Then, “Hold on a second,” reaching and taking back the phone.

She again looked at the image.

“Oh, ok—that’s Aaron—he’s not fat anymore.”

I slid the phone into my pocket.

“Aaron—you mean, the one who used to work here?”

She nodded, now looking at her own phone.

“Before you came,” she said—then held up her phone. “Here,” she said,

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“this is an old picture—from Mally’s birthday party.”

I took her phone. There was a large group in the picture, most looking drunk. In the center stood Mally, his arm around the man from the cafeteria. The man was sweaty—his hair wet, his cheeks glowing.

## 8.1

Midweek, a meeting—the usual:  
Mally holding court. Animal rights  
legislation.

A few terms:

“animal”—

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“human” —

“species” —

“genus” —

“rights” —

“consciousness” —

“pain” —

“conservation” —

“abuse” —

“cruel and unusual punishment” —

## 8.2

Most everything can be given quite a different perspective when looked at through the lens of evolution. Everyday

social interactions are—what? Do they advance the individual or the group? Or the gene?

A man and a woman are arguing over who does the dishes. *I did them last night. Well, I did them this morning! Well, then, I'll do them tomorrow morning!* Man and woman: a reproductive unit. The debate is over the exchange rate: you give me this, and I give you that. The goal is balance, equilibrium—all for the good of the group.

Culture provides a kind of maintenance of the species. Cultures, in order to survive, necessarily are wary of outsiders. Even small social groups follow



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this rule. Olive baboons force new males to wait on the periphery of the group for weeks, even months, else they will be chased away by the adult males. Yet young male baboons must leave their home group, else their genes will die out; they move to new groups, first waiting, then testing the waters, then fighting for entrance into the new social order. They bring new genes. In humans, taboos reinforce exogamy. Culture thus inculcates the learned rules of survival. Do. Do not. Prescription—proscription. Laws—lessons—discipline. Ritual—habit.

## 8.3

“*Most urgent*,” said Mr. Knox.

Again, I wondered if anything in Mr. Knox’s life was ever *not* urgent. I pictured him in the grocery store, talking to himself, shoving vegetables into a plastic bag: “This is *most urgent*”; on the toilet, his face clenched, “This is *most urgent*”; the proverbial clan gathered around his deathbed, asking for any last words, giving them all an irritated look: “This is *most urgent*.” This last image especially made me smile as I made my way to the elevator, down to the hallway, outside looking for a cab.

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Climbing 16<sup>th</sup> Street into  
Columbia Heights. Across to 14<sup>th</sup> Street.  
Walking from the cab—I stopped and looked  
around.

“Mr. Gray!”

Behind me was Mr. Knox,  
smiling. He looked even younger than  
usual—dressed in torn jeans, a leather jacket,  
boots, a red scarf. The faux-hawk was  
standing at half-mast.

He held out a hand—“It’s Zach,”  
he said.

“Ok—Zach,” I said, puzzled,  
shaking his hand.

“This,” he said, turning to reveal a woman, “is Ximena.”

“This,” he said to Ximena, “is Mr. Gray.”

We shook hands.

“*Mister*,” said Ximena, smiling.

“Gray is fine,” I said, which made Mr. Knox—Zach—smile.

## 8.4

We were sitting in a red bar, drinking beer from cans.

“Do you always wear stuff like that?” Ximena was asking.

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I looked down at my clothing: a brown blazer, brown slacks, a white shirt.

“Normally, I wear a tie,” I said.

She laughed—finishing her beer.

“This is a crazy fucking city,” she said.

“Ximena’s from Los Angeles,” said Mr. Knox—Zach.

She nodded, waving for more beer—looking again at my clothes.

“So,” she said, leaning forward, “you’re with the government.”

“Well, yes, I suppose you can put it that way.”

Again, she laughed. “And you talk so fucking weird—so formal!”

I drank my beer—waving for another. A waitress came, carrying a tray.

“Anything to eat?”

“Onion rings,” said Ximena.

“I’d like to look at the menu,” I said, which made Zach tighten his shoulders.

## 8.5

“It’s fucking crazy,” said Ximena.

“We kill animals every day, and no one gives a shit. I mean—what the fuck? Animals are living things, right?”

“Plants are living things,” I said.

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“Yeah, but animals have brains—they can feel pain—they’re conscious.”

The table was now full of empty cans. We sat surrounded by groups drinking laughing eating.

I was trying to eat a hamburger, but it kept falling out of the bun.

“That,” said Ximena, pointing to the burger, “is disgusting. That used to be a living thing, you know.”

I tried to take a bite—the burger fell out. Giving up, I wiped my hands. I took a drink—waving for another. I was beginning to feel drunk. I looked over at

Mr. Knox; he was inside a black cloud, staring at the table, his arms pulled in close to his chest.

Ximena leaned forward. “Let me ask you something, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Would you slit a cow’s throat— personally? Would you do that? You know they fucking hang them upside down, right, and slit their throats?”

She stood up, holding out her arms. “They stun them,” firing an imaginary gun, “then then hang them upside down— then they slit their throats.”



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She sat down. “Could you do that? Have you ever looked a cow in the eyes?”

A flash—two images from my past sprung up.

“Yes,” I said, “I saw a film once—they butchered the cows—it was gruesome. They slit their throats—they were swinging around, like they were dying, struggling—they were on some kind of conveyor belt.”

Drinking her beer, looking at me.

I drank. “But—it could just be—you know, *fucking* —anthropomorphism.”

Somehow, I managed to get that word past my tongue. I looked again at Zach—he was glowering at the table, fists clenched.

I looked up at Ximena, who saw me looking at him; she smiled.

“I mean,” I said, “we develop feelings for things that look human. We feel for a puppet, because it has eyes—because it looks like it’s living, feeling. But that’s just us—we’re putting those feelings there, whether or not they really exist. It’s the same with animals. Don’t get me wrong, animals can be highly intelligent—but—but if I can’t slit a cow’s throat, that might just

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be because of my own personal—of what I’m imagining.”

“You’re not imagining anything,” she said.

## 8.6

We talked like that—drunktalk—past three in the morning. At one point, we looked over at Zach and saw that he was sleeping, his head down on the table; the next, he was standing in the corner of the room, arms folded, a demon surveying the crowd. We finally had to leave when he

began standing very close to the bartender, staring into his soul.

Ximena was staying in a group house nearby, with friends. After convincing Zach to take a cab, we walked down toward Mount Pleasant, the air freezing against our calves and thighs.

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## 9.1

The only way to change history—to really change it—is to do so surreptitiously; to act as a cog, a strand among the plaits. Napoleon, Alexander,

Freud, Marx, et al.—their versions of life have been mown down. They are fodder for future cultural imperatives. But what if you could influence others without their knowing?

## 9.2

Note-taking for animal rights' legislation, I began with human-animal relations: the hunter-gatherer with the dog; nomads with camels; the farmer with horses. Symbiosis—thus bypassing the moral question. Animals assist humans, for the betterment of both species. Without animals,

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humans could survive, but it would be that much more difficult.

*Section 306(b): “species”: species is a classificatory term and, as such, is necessarily limited.*

*Species are taxonomic groupings made by humans. In some cases, these groups may be known only to a select few scientists (e.g., the phylum kinorhycha). In fact, as Darwin pointed out, the classification of species, while certainly methodological, is in the end quite arbitrary. Even though Darwin was*

*before Mendel (before DNA and the modern synthesis), his summation still holds today. DNA has not rid us of the problem of species classification. There is no bright line between species. Species are ever in flux. What is a species to one scientist, may be a genus or subspecies to another.*

*Classifying species is especially difficult (but by no means only so) when considering the 2 following areas: 1) extinct groups and 2) bacteria. Consider that some scientists argue that we should*



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*categorize species according to 'reproductive capacity.' Taking this into account, how are we to categorize, for instance, the offspring of Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens? Classifying bacteria has become, in fact, a game of percentages. Bacteria are ever in flux, even transferring genes, and are thus notoriously difficult to classify. In fact, there are whole fields of scientific research (including accompanying scientific journals) devoted to the task of said classification.*

*Bacteria often 'become' a part of other organisms—other species. They form symbiotic relationships. In fact, there is no such thing as a human without bacteria. Each of us is awash in trillions of microorganisms--on our skin, in our intestines, even our eyes. They help us to live our everyday lives. In light of this, the idea of drawing a straight line across species seems quite preposterous! To be sure, as an academic exercise, species classification can be quite helpful (especially in the field of medicine);*

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*but outside of the world of textbooks,  
in our teeming undulating landscape,  
we live our lives in motion, in an  
ever ongoing feedback loop with  
plants, animals, and bacteria.*

From “species,” I next moved on to “animal”; from animal to “omnivore”; from “omnivore” to “agriculture”; and so on.

## 9.3

I thought that I might be an artist—a photographer. I carried my camera everywhere. I’ve always liked seeing over

hearing. Perhaps it seems superfluous—unnecessary—or even silly, to feel the need to choose one over the other; but in my mind, it was an either/or distinction. I was convinced that the more I focused only on seeing, the more honed that sense would become. Hearing would only be a distraction.

I was thirteen when I began; I remember the age, because my mother gave me a camera for my entrance into the teenage years.

“Here,” she said, holding out a package.

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Inside—a worn leather case,  
inside of which was an antique Kodak  
Vigilant.

I loved that camera.

I pushed a button, and the  
camera opened slowly, like an accordion. I  
had to buy special film, or sometimes, if I  
was feeling motivated, trim down larger film  
to fit onto the spool.

## 9.4

That camera taught me patience.  
Only able to shoot a few frames per roll, I  
began photographing things—objects. At

the time, I was very much influenced by the photographs of Paul Strand and Tina Modotti. I had this idea that I could photograph everyday objects to look like perfect geometrical shapes. I don't really remember my reasoning behind this project, only that, at the time, it seemed of the utmost importance.

So, for example, I would take a photograph of the shadow of the slats of a chair—three black rectangles against the concrete patio. A photograph like that would bring deep satisfaction (again, I don't really remember why).

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## 9.5

For a while, around the time I was sixteen or seventeen, I switched to a more modern camera. The Vigilant was a temperamental thing, requiring just the right technique—loving care—and I did not always have the diligence for all that. The next camera was a Canon—a sleek EOS-3. I did not love that camera—it was lust.

Perhaps, though, lust is on the spectrum of love. I saved up all my money to buy it, which investment, I'm sure, helped convince me that it was love. There seems to be a direct correlation between the cost of a thing

and our love for it (as the object depreciates in value, so often also does our fondness for it). Of course, that is not always the case. The older camera was imbued with sentimental value. It was an old friend (perhaps also, though, because it was an antique, it was worth something after all).

Taking pictures with my flashy EOS-3 required no patience, really. I must've shot over a thousand photographs just in my first year of owning it. It was such a boringly reliable thing. Using it, I felt not like an artist—rather like a photojournalist. Stylized—snapshots—



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capturing news! It was also quite clunky (of course, that is the norm for cameras nowadays), especially when compared to my compact Vigilant.

## 9.6

Sophomore year, my mother convinced me to take a photography course. That ruined things. It was ten or so students, sitting in a wide open room (the same room where I took a drafting class as freshman).

Large plate-glass windows,  
students sitting on stools. We each had our  
own drafting table.

Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown was *cool*.  
He was the coolest person ever—so super  
cool, coolness just oozed from his pores.  
God, I hated that man. Everyone in that  
class was the coolest of the super-cool. They  
wore cool clothes, had cool hair, listened to  
cool music.

Of course, Paul Strand and Roy  
DeCarava were passé.

“Fox,” he said, taking me aside,  
“you need to expand your horizons. You  
spend too much time photographing man-

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made things. You need to go out into nature. See the world—the earth—the trees and plants. Alright?”

I nodded, thinking—*Fuck you—what the fuck does that mean?*

After a few weeks, though, I couldn't help myself—I began to try and fit in. I went out into nature. I photographed birds, trees, dirt, houses, roads, creeks, leaves, worms, cars, clouds, flowers, fences, knolls, cows, ponds, mud, rain, and rocks. That was all I could think of. While I was in the

developing room, Mr. Brown came in behind me.

“What do we have here?” he asked, smiling.

He began to look over my prints (I hated that).

He loved them—the cool class loved them.

I felt like a sellout.

## 9.7

Each semester, I would again take *photography*. I hated the class, the people, but taking that course allowed me to photograph as often and whenever and

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wherever I wanted—as well, it provided access to a darkroom. During course hours, I would enter the classroom, sign-in, then leave the school, wandering around our small town. I photographed the town barber, the waitresses in the diner, the pumps at the gas station, the white lines of the road, our one stop light (yellow), the knob on the door of the hardware store, the bank facade, the old men sitting outside on their porches, the flag, the row of chimneys, the jagged cracks in sidewalks, the mortar between bricks, the sunburnt cheeks of a young boy, the wrinkles of a middle-aged mother, the hubcab of a

vintage automobile, a piece of gum stuck to the side of a building, the hair on the clapboards of a house painted white and red, the town police officer sitting in his cruiser in the shade, the front windows of the school. Then, after an hour or so, I would head back to the class, that warehouse-sized room, and sign in. Or, if it were my day in the darkroom, I'd spend the entire hour in there, smelling the fixer, sulfur dioxide, dipping print after print—then emerging out into the world, my mind mixing together images and nature, darkness and light.

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The bureaucratization of art.

Suddenly, there was a relationship between something I loved—had a passion for—and attendance, participation, grades, rules.

There was a *proper* way to photograph. A *proper* way to see through the lens. And I saw my art changing. Much as I would like to have thought myself immune, those rules began to seep into my craft—my ways of seeing.

Worse yet, I had to *share* my photographs with others. I was not allowed to study them, to keep them to myself. I had to *report for group discussion*, where we

would have things like *feedback* and *commentary* and *analysis*. I didn't want any of that! The worst thing a photographer could do, to my mind, was to *talk about* photography. The course took something that was personal and private, something deeply held, and showed it for all to see—tearing it apart, making it subject to criteria and evaluation. How can art be taught? How can group thinking, bureaucracy, guide art? *Disillusioned* is the word used in such cases as mine; yet I know not what the words means, even to this day.



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I came home from work one day to the realization that my carpet was filthy. I vacuumed; then, unsatisfied, went out and rented a machine, washing the fibers. After that, I noticed everything else dirty in my place—the kitchen, with dust behind the refrigerator, on top of the cabinets. I went on my hands and knees, digging into cabinets, the back of which I'd not seen in years. The bathroom, with tiles coated in film—the shower curtain in need of washing—the cabinet under the sink filled with junk. Dust, dust, dust. Eventually, I made my way to the bedroom, the bed—

underneath of which was a suitcase full of my old cameras, film, even photographs. I sat there on my knees, covered in sweat and dirt, and looked through it all, smelling the images, touching the leather case, bathed in memories multisensory.

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## 10.1

I began carrying a camera in my bag—something just to have in there, to bring me comfort. I woke early, walking down to Dupont, riding the metro to the

Center; climbing up and walking to a coffee shop; then sitting in the square, waiting to see her at the busstop. I pulled out the camera. Honking horns—the sounds of morning waking. I looked up, and she was there—I held up the lens and took a picture: her head turning to look back, her eyes bright, cheeks smiling—*click*.

## 10.2

A cranberry juice, a roll. Sitting in the cafeteria, I stood staring at the fish sandwiches, unable to look away. Behind me, the line lengthened. Slowly—I reached

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out my hand, taking a grape tomato salad.

*Iacta alea est.*

A little orange woman was sitting behind my pillar, so I walked around for a bit, tray in hands. Near the exit, leaning over his meal, alone, I saw Aaron.

I wended my way; I sat.

I looked at my salad. Eyeballs split open, grown red in brine.

He was chewing loudly.

“Aaron, right? My name’s Gray,” I said, holding out my hand. “I think you used to work in my Department.”

As we shook, I told him where I worked.

“Rong pointed you out to me,” I said.

Aaron smiled, wiping his lips.

“Sarah,” he said, “how is she?”

“Good. She runs *The Code* and *Stat.* now. Mal—Syd runs—the politicians and lobbyists.”

A slow nod.

“How is Syd?” he asked, picking up his water.

I pretended to think on this.

“He’s—very much a political animal,” I said.

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A tight-lipped smile. “Yes,” he said. “But we all are, aren’t we?”

I’d slipped a tomato in my mouth—swallowing.

Then he was standing, holding his tray.

“Nice meeting you, Gray.”

I nodded, and he was gone.

I stared at my bowl, thinking about fish on a bun—I could see them there, in my mind’s eye, swimming, transforming into nice clean filets, fried, between bread.

A tap on my shoulder,  
interrupting my reverie—Aaron leaning  
down.

“Listen—Gray,” he said, “I don’t  
know why I even care—but I don’t want you  
to get the wrong impression about me,  
alright? Impressions are important around  
here, right? Just don’t believe everything Syd  
says about me, alright? Take it with a grain  
of salt. We had—some words, right? And—  
Sarah—she’s alright, but sometimes she can’t  
see—she sees things too black-and-white. I  
don’t know why I have to tell you this—I  
guess I just don’t—I dunno. Nice to meet  
you, alright?”



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And again he was gone. I turned to watch him walking fast down the hallway, into Congress' lower depths.

### 10.3

Nearing four in the afternoon, Mally comes in effervescent, bubbles and cream.

“How about happy hour?” he asks, hands on hips.

Rong looks at me—a question mark.

“Sure,” I say.

At five, we three close email, shutdown computers, pack bags and briefcases, grab satchels and purses, and head out to find a cab.

“There’s this new place in the Atlas District,” says Mally, and I was unsure of whether he was talking to the driver or to Rong and I.

But the driver heard regardless—off to Maryland Avenue, taking a back route through the quiet neighborhood of Capitol Hill. We pass houses with turrets and bricks, tree-lined sidewalks covered in interns and legislative staffers wearing skirts and loafers.

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A bar—entering, we can feel ourselves as part of a groundswell. Work is over: time now for cheap drinks. Mally manages an empty booth—backed up to a large mirror, facing both the bar and 12<sup>th</sup> Street.

“What is this place?” I ask, but Mally is off, talking to strangers, ordering drinks.

## **10.4**

We drink. Mally is again off talking to someone, a man in a vest. They seem already like bosom buddies.

Rong is texting the entire time,  
and I holler *Who is it?*

“Bob,” she says—her husband,  
“he’s out with his friends—they go to sports  
bars.”

Her thumbs little spider legs,  
moving across the keypad.

I ask her about Bob and his work,  
*How is everything?*

“It’s good,” she says, “but he’s  
looking for something new—the pay is shit.”

Still texting with her right hand,  
she uses her left to toss back the rest of her  
beer—then beckons a waitress.

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Bob does something with  
computer programming.

“Bob wants to know if you want  
to see a Nats game sometime.”

“Sure,” I say.

She smiles—then back to texting  
(I assume sending a reply to Bob).

## 10.5

Mally comes over, his face red  
splotches. Rong is in the bathroom.

He puts his arm around my  
shoulders.

“What the hell are you doing,  
Fox?” he says.

Mally never calls me Fox. I  
haven’t seen him drunk in a while.

He is a blossoming flower of love,  
releasing his pollen into the world.

“Getting hungry,” I say.

We are talking in half-yells,  
forced to lean into each other. The bar is  
playing music non-stop, a mix of 80s,  
country, and hip-hop. *I took that horse to  
my ex-wife, walking through the city streets  
at night, Brooklyn 24/7.*

Mally is shocked.

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“My god,” he says, “that’s not right! We gotta get you something to eat!”

He begins waving for the waiter—then stands, marching to the bar.

He comes back with menus.

“I don’t want to see you starve,” says Mally—dead serious.

I begin to say something, but stop; instead, I flip through the menu: escargot, ramen, buffalo wings. *What kind of bar is this?*

Rong comes back from the bathroom.

“Ok,” she says, “I’m going—gotta get home and make dinner.”

“No!” says Mally, standing. “You can’t go, Ronggy! We need you!”

*Ronggy?*

Rong looks at me laughing.

I stand and hug her. “You ok to make it home?” I ask.

She nods.

Mally is already off, looking at a picture on the wall—his face inches from the glass.

“Where was this taken?” he asks.



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I am eating fried food. At first, I thought it was clams, but now I think that it might be some kind of meat.

“What is this?” I ask Mally.

Mally is now full-drunk, and I’m trying to catch up.

He takes a bite.

“That’s clams,” he says, immediately.

“Are you sure?”

He takes another bite—widening his eyes.

“What is that shit!” he says—staring at the plate—horrified.

“I dunno—that’s why I asked you.”

He shakes his head. “I wouldn’t eat that if I were you,” he says, taking another bite.

## 10.7

“Mally,” I say, fighting to keep his attention (he’s looking around the room), “I saw Aaron today in the cafeteria.”

He stops moving his head and looks at me—drunk-serious.

“Aaron—what’d he say?” he asks.

“Nothing, really. That you *had words*.”

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“Had words’?”

I nodded, drinking.

Mally is lost in thought—then  
drinking.

“That’s true,” he says. “We did  
have words.”

“And?”

But he’s gone again—saying,  
“This is a good song!”

Standing and rolling his hips,  
dancing an Irish/Hawaiian hula-jig.

Mally gets shit-faced, but for some reason, the alcohol does not affect me.

I am sliding further down into the booth, looking at the crowd standing around me, the bodies moving in syncopated rhythm; outside, groups of two and three are laughing up the sidewalk, standing in the middle of the road, the wind softly pushing hair across cheeks and nose bridges.

I decide to go home.

“You sure you want to stay?” I ask.

He nods.

“Alright,” I say, bending down to grab my bag.

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As I near the door, I think of something—pull out my camera and take a picture of Mally sitting in the booth. At the last instant, he sees me and smiles.

## 10.9

Coming home, I see Lyon sitting outside the building. I let him in, and we walk inside, taking the elevator.

“You want a nightcap?” he asks.

“Sure,” I say.

We sit in his apartment, facing the windows. Lyon brings out glasses, scotch and soda.

“Thanks,” I say.

We sit like that for a while. Drinking, looking out at the night, each lost in thought.

After a spell, I ask, “How long’ve you lived here, Lyon?”

“In this building?” he asks.

“No—in DC.”

“I was born here,” he said. “Over in the LeDroit Park...”

I was too tired to talk, so we just sat for a while more. At some point, I could

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hear him talking, but I'd drifted off, hovering along the edge of sleep.

When I woke, I looked over and saw Lyon sleeping in his chair. I stood and grabbed a blanket from the couch, draping it over him.

On my way out, I looked over the bookcases, seeing pictures of children and grandchildren, postcards and greeting cards. One entire bookcase was filled with rocks.

I turned and looked at Lyon, the moon coming through the window. I pulled out my camera and took a picture of him sitting.

Then, quietly, I left his apartment, walking to the stairs, down to the third floor, down the hall to my own apartment.



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## 11.1

College was old stone buildings, the brick-and-glass library, the lab with sheeny black tables, books and more books. Determined, I began by majoring in

Photography; determination soon faded, lasting only a semester before I grew sickened by the rigid structuring of my art. I wanted to photograph my own way of photographing. They let me use the darkroom, so I would go into the department only to develop film.

Next, it was Evolutionary Biology; then Linguistics; and, finally, Biolinguistics. There was no single department for that, but they let me work something out by double-majoring in biology and linguistics. How and why do humans communicate? What is the origin of language? What does language do? What is the relationship between

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language and the brain? These were the sort of questions driving my research.

## 11.2

Apes do not create language. A few apes in captivity (bonobos, chimpanzees, etc) have been taught, after thousands of repetitions, to use human words; but apes do nothing like the sort in the wild. Howler monkeys use different calls for different types of warnings, but that is generally not considered *language*.

The difficulty in looking for the origins of language is that it is all, of course,

backwards work. So, let's say we go looking for the evolution of the primate brain. We might look, for example, at Broca's area; so, looking at skulls, we can see if, over time, this area has developed. With brain science, it is all about volume. The brain is a metabolic machine; metabolism shapes diet. Some argue that the trade-off of having big brains is why humans have less muscle than other primates (chimpanzees are six times stronger than humans). But this is all just speculation.

Another way to go about it is to observe infants, to see how they acquire language. How do babies learn to talk?

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Gestures are important for all humans, but they are especially so for babies. Babies use their bodies to show what they want. They begin entering language by copying adults without understanding what they're doing. Babies parrot their parents; like parrots, they can't comprehend the meaning behind the sounds they make. It is not until much later that children are able to see themselves in others (that is, to use language to communicate).

### 11.3

Each culture has its own language not by chance. This is true not only of nations, but also of small groups. Regions have dialects, ways of speaking. Subcultures have cants, special words that only they recognize (sometimes, intentionally so, as in the case of gangs). Different professions use different jargons. The more an individual becomes enmeshed within the specific language of a particular culture (e.g. Russian, Molecular Biology, Fishing), the more difficult it becomes to communicate with outsiders. A person who spends their whole life in a small mining village will have difficulty in talking to a cosmopolitan Wall

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Street trader who lives on the Upper East Side, even if they both speak—ostensibly—English.

## 11.4

In law school, I studied Administrative Law. My second year dealt primarily with the *US Code* and the *Code of Federal Regulations*. In my third year, I spent as much time as possible digging through various statutes and regulations, rules and interpretations. I was fascinated by the daily debates over the usage of terms within regulations, how various lobbying

groups would battle it out with administrative agencies, spending tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, all just to define the particular meaning of a particular word in a particular regulation that nobody else really even knew or cared about. During my final semester, I spent time researching the early history of terms used within founding documents.

## 11.5

When the United States was being formed, Noah Webster was a propagandist working with Alexander Hamilton; both were Federalists. Webster



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wanted a strong central government for the new country. He especially wanted the US to be culturally separate from England.

Webster wrote books with rules for grammar and writing, each with the purpose not only of guiding children, but more specifically of instilling those children with an *American* grammar, *American* spelling, and an *American* understanding of words. The purpose of *Webster's Dictionary* was to unite the nation with one language, under God—an *American* language.

*The Constitution, The US Code, The Code of Federal Regulations*—they each

and all are written in that same American language, using those American words. It is my job to define those words. Immediately, then, the question becomes: *whose definition is to be used?* Webster's (the Federalist definition)? Current definitions? Whig definitions? Democratic-Republican definitions?

## 11.6

Consider the four following words:

- 1) "Liberty"
- 2) "Net neutrality"
- 3) "Welfare"

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#### 4) “Representation”

### 11.6.1

#### “Liberty”

“Liberty” is separate entirely from “freedom.”  
Contained within these words are “nature”  
“society” and “law”.

The ideas of human freedom and liberty  
cannot be discussed or defined without  
answering:

- a) Is there a God?
- b) What is the relationship between the  
individual and society?

c) What role does law play in freedom?

What is the relationship between privacy and freedom?

d) Is freedom an action or inaction?

These ideas are all connected to the ideas of “positive liberty” and “negative liberty.” The Framers certainly believed in a Judeo-Christian/Deist God, a belief that does not hold as much influence today. The Framers believed in the Constitution as a social contract. They were influenced by thinkers such as Hobbes and Rousseau. We can contrast this idea to the ideas of evolutionary game theory, wherein social

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interactions are viewed as bettering the species (or gene).

### **11.6.2**

#### **“Net neutrality”**

Neologisms like “net neutrality” can be looked at in one of two ways:

- a) As words that are completely new, and thus unconstrained from what we call “free definition”
- b) As words that connect back to the traditions inherent (either explicit or implicit) within the Constitution.

“Net neutrality” is, in fact, connected to the ideas of “social contract”, “freedom”, “liberty”, and “monopoly.”

In order to define “net neutrality,” we must first come to an understanding of the relationship between Government, the individual, commerce, and privacy. Is “free trade” synonymous with freedom? That is to ask: what is the relationship between the freedom of corporations and the freedom of individuals? Are they one and the same? Who is more likely to encroach upon the individual’s privacy: government or business?

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### 11.6.3

#### “Welfare”

The word “welfare” is used at the very beginning of the Constitution: “promote the general welfare.” What does this phrase mean?

In *The Code*, Title 42 deals with Public Health and Welfare (PHW in Rong’s terminology). But, in fact, most everything in *The Code* could be placed underneath this Title. Couldn’t we say that every Act of Congress “promotes the general welfare”? It is quite an ambiguous phrase.

“Welfare” has yet developed certain specific meanings over the years. In the late-1800s and early-1900s, Welfare was connected to *tenements* which, in turn, became connected to *urban renewal*. This relationship between “urban renewal” and “welfare” continued through the 1960s (the formation of HUD) and on through to today.

But this is just one small aspect of “welfare.” In contemporary society, the meaning of “welfare” is ever-changing. It is connected to the ideas of the “War on Poverty,” “Welfare Reform,” and “Personal Responsibility.”



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Welfare is also fundamentally related to the idea of “positive liberty”; that is, the idea that the Government should assist citizens in *becoming more free* than they already are. The concept of welfare is also connected to the idea of a social contract, of society as an active ongoing *consent* (individual citizens must, at all times—either explicitly or implicitly—*agree to be governed*).

#### 11.6.4

“Representation”

The word “representation” has also a variety of implicit and explicit meanings. What is a Representative? Is it someone who votes as the voters tell them to vote? Is it someone who uses their own judgment? A Representative is a person who is also a symbol. Thus, we analyze how well that person acts as a symbol. Voting, in a way, is the act of evaluating how well the politician symbolizes our own values (which values must necessarily be placed within a hierarchy).

In fact, all Government is a representation of the social contract. I myself, as a government worker, am

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representative of some specified symbolic government function (*government controls the meaning of words*).

## 11.7

The paradox, then, should be self-evident. I know very well that language is lived, that the meanings of words fluctuate—I know also, in fact, that that is the beauty of language. You will not find me saying to someone, “No, you didn’t use that word *correctly*.” Because I believe, as a biolinguist, that the meanings of words are dependent upon both context and their efficacy in

communicating. “Correct” is whatever “works”.

Take the following example. Two friends are talking about a box of insects.

“Hand me that beetle,” says Friend 1. Friend 2, seeing that there are no beetles present, instead hands Friend 1 a bagel. Friend 2 knows that, in this case, “beetle” means “bagel”. The important thing is that communication took place: both participants in the dialogue understood what was meant.

Defining words—trying to lock in their meaning—is quite absurd. It is like a physicist who studies objects at rest.

Language is motion. Of the above words, I

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find the concept of “welfare” particularly illuminating. If you were to trace the changing meaning of this term, as would a philologist (etymologist), through *The Articles of Confederation*, *The US Constitution*, on through the Tenement Act, the New Deal, the War on Poverty (Economic Opportunity Act), and the Personal Responsibility Act, then you would get a small glimpse of the negative capability required to perform my daily duties.

## 12.1

Saturday, I made my way over to the university. The darkroom was hidden in an old administrative building, what was once the art department; that department now had a new state-of-the-art facility on the

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other side of campus. The darkroom was occasionally used by students, but, since the advent of the digital, it mostly sat empty. I came across it during my time in law school, when looking for a secluded place to study.

I knew a few old hands there who let me have access to the building. I couldn't tell you their names, but I knew their faces, and they knew mine. Film—analogue—photography was fast going the way of Medieval manuscripts; and so, as often happens, a kind of club (or guild, as it were) had developed around the dying art.

## 12.2

I rode the elevator down to the basement, walking down the hall, past stacks of old office furniture, empty open rooms, dusty cinderblock walls long-ago painted white. The hum of fluorescent light led the way. Through institutional double-doors, tan with metal handplates, swinging into a small alcove, a man sitting behind a desk fiddling with an expensive looking camera.

“What the hell is that thing?” I asked, coming and leaning over the counter.

“It’s—”



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He hit the camera against the table.

“Careful,” I said.

“Nah,” he said, grabbing it again, “this thing won’t break—one of those new Panasonics.”

I knew this man. He was short, squat, with large glasses—a bald dome, with hair shooting black and gray out to the sides; he wore jeans, suspenders, and a blue flannel shirt, faded, opened to reveal a white t-shirt speckled with variegated spots. He was sitting on a schoolchair, the kind with

carriage bolts, his legs spread wide as he leaned to look at the camera.

He looked either angry or irritated. He hit the camera again, chuckling.

“What’s it for?” I asked.

“Theater department,” he said, “don’t ask me why.”

He looked up. “This damn thing,” he said, holding up the camera, “cost more than my children.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

I waited a while more, watching him beat the thing around, leaving when he brought out a pair of pliers.

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## 12.3

The darkroom was empty. I went over to the worktable. From my bag, I pulled out the enclosed film. After cutting, I placed the negative in the carrier; then carried it to the enlarger, sliding it in; then focused it, pulled out a sheet of paper, and flicked on the light—twelve seconds—flicked off the light; walked over to the sink, placing the paper in the developer—agitating; transferred the paper to the stop bath — waited; transferred the paper to the fixer—waited; then repeated this process for each

negative, washing and hanging them all at the end.

## 12.4

Waiting for the prints to dry, I went back out to the main room. The mole-ish man was still sitting fiddling with the Panasonic.

“You want something from the machine?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said, reaching into his pocket.

“That’s ok,” I said.

“Thanks—ginger ale,” he said.

“Ok.”

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I went back down the hallway, past the old furniture, trying to remember which turn to make for vending. Somehow, I made a wrong turn and ended up in what looked like an old biology lab. There were posters hanging on the walls—a skeleton, the cardiovascular system, the nervous system—drawers sitting open, an overhead projector, even a small microscope.

The room was cold. I stood there for a while, leaning against a desk covered in dust, looking at the posters, the images of humans with their skin peeled.

Then, from the corner of my eye,  
I saw a rat run—pause —run across the tiles,  
and I decided to leave.

Down the hall again, turning,  
turning, I found a bathroom and went  
inside—pissing, washing my hands. Coming  
out, I was lost in thought, nearly bumping  
into the vending machines. The food inside  
looked as old as the building. I bought the  
ginger ale, along with a twinkie, reasoning  
that it was outside of time.

## 12.5

Coming back to the room, I  
found the man gone. I went back down the

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hall to the darkroom. He was standing there looking over my prints.

“What are these with?” he asked.

I handed him the ginger-ale,  
opening my twinkie—taking a bite.

“Vigilant,” I said, garbling my words.

I pointed to the table, where the camera sat half inside my bag.

He turned to look at me.

“You eat those things?”

I took another bite.

He went over to the table, picking up my camera, taking it out of the case—opening it, closing, turning it in his hands.

“This,” he said, looking at me, “is a camera with character—you trim your own film?”

I nodded, shoving the remainder of the yellow foam into my mouth.

He sipped his ginger ale, laying my camera aside. He stood thinking for a moment; then, quietly, he began cleaning the room, checking the bottles of chemicals.

Looking at his back, his head bent—for an instant, I was reminded of my uncle.



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## 12.6

I went down the line, looking from one print to the next.

She at the bus-stop, turning to look back. Her eyes filled the image--then her smile, her cheekbones, her hair covered by a wool cap. Again, I felt the stirring in my stomach, and again I felt the gap between the romantic idealized world and that other place.

Mally in the bar. Sitting alone, surrounded by body parts cut-off by the lens.

“Brassai—huh?” said the mole man, seeing where I was looking.

I saw what he meant: Mally was sitting in the corner of the booth, facing me, his head between the window and the mirror. He was smiling—bright red; but, as in Brassai’s iconic image, in the mirror Mally’s smile looked distorted—melancholy, almost sinister.

Lyon sleeping, a bookshelf of rocks in the background, the window. It was this image that most arrested me. His head was flat against the back of the chair, his face almost looking straight out. I knew from my memory that he was sleeping, but in the

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photograph he could as well be wide awake.  
His cheeks wrinkled.

As anyone who lives alone, who is often always ever alone, I lived in my thoughts, day in, day out, night, morning, thinking always to myself, even too often blending together dreams and plans and goals and daydreams with concrete solid reality. Photographs were a way for me to make the real more real; a way to pin down experience—memories. Lyon—my thoughts had jumbled him with old stories, with foggy

ideas; looking at that photograph forced me to see him anew.

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## 13.1

We all know quite well that we are numbed to tragedy, to suffering. An earthquake, a bombing, a murder, a rape, a tornado, a fire—it's difficult to notice, to feel

for each and all of these horrible events day in, day out. We have to remind ourselves of our own humanity. To do so, we will often choose (either consciously or unconsciously) one or two designated *types of tragedies* which we will allow to affect us; these, usually, are tragedies with which we feel a personal connection. So, for instance, we might allow ourselves to feel connected to those who die from AIDs, because of our once having a friend who died from the disease. But it is simply impossible to both function and feel for all daily disasters. We choose what to mourn and what to gloss over (though often, it should be said, others do

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the choosing for us—the media, for instance, will choose to focus on one tragedy over another).

Humans, lamentably, heroically, are ever always able to adapt. We see an obstacle—we adapt, whether that obstacle be physical or psychological, imaginary or real. Adaptation is a characteristic of all species, but humans especially are able to enact this process; the question that arises over time, then, is: when is adaptation maladaptation? *When are we adapting in the wrong way?* (*When are we adapting in a way that is not beneficial, or even detrimental?*) In fact, all

of human life, both individual and cultural, is heuristic, an ever-ongoing learning process. At least, this is what I tell myself when I find myself being bored by news of a tragedy, flipping the channel.

## 13.2

Government, like all bureaucratic institutions, works as does a hamster wheel, a perpetual motion machine—it is always moving, but only in the same place. In fact, one could say that the most fundamental goal of all government organizations is to maintain the status quo. Such maintenance often requires seeming advances forward (e.g.



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the inflation rate), which are in fact contemporary manifestations of previous situations.

Government does not *make*; government *reacts*. We can think of the government as a giant sphere, constantly rotating in different directions, yet staying relatively in place. When an event requires government reaction, an outgrowth appears on the sphere; then, in order to compensate, the rest of the government must correspondingly adapt, maintaining the spherical shape. Once equilibrium is retained, rotation resumes.

*Cause célèbre*, along with disasters and tragedies, often create events which force the government to react. If a controversy or disaster lasts long enough, garnering enough public attention, then the representative government will feel compelled to respond to constituents. One can see immediately, then, the critical role played by the media in shaping policy.

### 13.3

A natural extension of my job is attempting to predict upcoming legislation (rather: *upcoming upcoming* legislation). The easiest way to do this is not to look at

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which party is in power, or listen to the State of the Union, or any policy speeches, but instead to simply watch the news—television. At home, I have a notebook beside the television, wherein I jot down ideas. See what stories stick around longest.

## 13.4

On Wednesday, it was another school shooting. I clicked on the television, and there it was—children running away from the building, ambulances, officers running, reporters below on the ground. I wrote down in my notebook: *school shooting*

*legislation? Gun control? Allowing teachers to carry guns? More psychological observation of students?* By Sunday, though, the story was dead—buried beneath sports and foreign affairs.

## 13.5

The following week, Tuesday, it was a spate of suicides (ten in all), all in the same town. The students had coordinated with each other via social networking. I wrote: *Suicide prevention legislation? Social networks tracking suicide? Suicide awareness campaigns? More psychological observation of students?*

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The story went on until Friday, and I began fleshing out definitions:

*“suicide”: suicide is generally considered intentional self-death. The role of “intention” often causes debate, considering that most people that attempt suicide are one of the following: 1) under the influence of alcohol, 2) under the influence of drugs, 3) juveniles, or 4) mentally ill. In a murder case (the killing of another human) any of the above 4 criteria would be enough to consider “diminished responsibility.” From a*

*legal point of view, then, one can see how there is rarely such thing as a “mentally responsible” suicide.*

*The causes of suicide are nearly as varying as their individual circumstances; which fact has not prevented their categorization...*

That was as far as I'd gotten; by the following Monday, the story was buried. A month or so later, I read a magazine article on the case, including opinions from psychologists (studying suicide pacts), sociologists (studying anomie), and media analysts (warning of the dangers of social

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networking). The authors seemed to agree that this type of event was unlikely to become a trend.

## 13.6

That same Tuesday, the day of the group suicide, there were two small news stories, both about water. The first was about DC tap water containing various contaminants, including lead, caffeine, and ibuprofen. The second story was about the lack of oversight of bottled water (a gap between the FDA and EPA). I made a small note: *water regulation?*

A week later, the DC Water and Sewage Authority (WASA) story appeared again—this time, closer to the front page. Over the weekend, there was a related story on the environmental impact of bottled water. My note: *federal regulation of bottled water?*

Then, finally: a front-page story about schoolchildren in Southeast DC (downtown Anacostia) who were suffering from the effects of lead poisoning. Little Joelle and her brother Cordell had been having stomach aches and fevers accompanied by hallucinations. The doctor confirmed lead poisoning. Reaction to the



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story was swift: the community was angry.  
But was this a local issue or a Federal issue?

## 13.7

A Thursday, Mally called a meeting. I was already prepared to talk about water. I brought along copies of the Safe Drinking Water Act, along with sections from the Code of Federal Regulations (21 CFR § 129, 165; 40 CFR § 130-143).

“Joelle and Cordell,” said Mally, looking around the room.

“Water,” I said.

Mally nodded.

We had a nice discussion that day about the various aspects of *clean water*. Mally had been in discussions with both bottled water companies and environmental lobbyists, so he knew his game.

## 13.8

“Why do they need new law?” asked Rong. “Why can’t they just write something into *Code 2*?”

“Because,” said Mally, “industry doesn’t want that, and we don’t know who is doing the writing—the EPA? FDA?”

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As Mally continued talking, I thought back to the photograph—the reflection.

Mally smiling; Mally sinister—two sides of the same coin.

As often happens during meetings, I fast grew bored. One moment, excited with new law—the next, bored with classification, enunciation, regulation. Congress averages somewhere around eight or nine thousand bills per year; of those, between 350-460 are passed, enacted; of bills that become law, around 40-50 are

meaningless (naming a building, a park, a highway, a day of the year, etc.). So, out of the 350-460 laws passed, we are left with around 290-410 that actually produce something worth consideration. However, of those, roughly half to two-thirds can be dealt with by the relevant Departments. For example, if a law is passed regarding the price of milk, then only the Department of Agriculture need be involved (though the FDA might poke around). Our office deals only with those pieces of legislation that impact two or more Departments—legislation that causes bureaucratic conflict or confusion. This ends up being somewhere

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around 100-200 laws a year. Of that 100-200, most can be resolved by quickly referring to *The Code, Stat., or Code 2*. All in all, there are only 30-50 laws per year that actually require significant attention—enough for our office to deal with as a team (about 1 every week or so); of these, usually only around five to ten per year are enough to wake me from my slumber.

## 13.9

The FDA has specific definitions for “mineral water,” “ground water,” “artesian water,” “surface water,” “purified

water,” “sparkling water,” “well water,” “product water,” “operations water,” “sterile water,” and “bottled drinking water.” I spent the week reviewing these terms—their origins, as well as their regulatory realizations. Then I put up my feet.

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## 14.1

Hungry and bored, I went up to Lyon, seeing if he wanted to share something for dinner. A man a little older than me opened the door looking perplexed.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Oh—hello,” I said, “my name’s Fox. I was just checking to see if Lyon wanted to share dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah—I’m his neighbor in one of the downstairs condos —sometimes we have dinner together.”

“Why?”

“I—uh—I don’t really know why, really. I forget how it started.”

He sized me up.

“Fox, huh?”

I nodded.



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His look changed—realization.  
“Wait a minute,” he said, “are you Gray?”  
“Yes,” I said, smiling, “that’s me.”  
“Oh, ok, ok,” he said, smiling,  
turning aside, “come on in.”

## 14.2

Lyon was sitting at the dining table, looking over a game of chess.

“Come on, come on,” he said.

“Gray’s here,” said the man. He walked around the table, sitting down opposite Lyon.

Lyon was looking at the board.

“Go on,” he said, not looking up.

I stood watching.

“Helps the memory,” said the man, looking at me.

Then looking down—moving a piece.

“You play?” he asked me.

I frowned. “Not in a long time,” I said.

“Oh—you should, you should,” he said.

“Gotcha,” said Lyon, moving a piece.

The man looked at the move—then moved in response.

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“Not quite,” he said.

We were quiet for a moment,  
looking at the board.

“So you’re—” I said.

“Oh, yeah,” said the man, half-  
standing, holding out his hand. “Marcus—  
his son.”

We shook.

Again, we grew silent.

I looked over into the kitchen—  
empty Styrofoam boxes, dirty plates, forks,  
knives.

Afterwards, saying goodbye,  
Marcus followed me out into the hall.

“Yeah, so—thanks,” he said,  
again taking my palm.

“We just bumped into each  
other—” I began.

“Good man, good man,” he said,  
looking me straight on.

We were standing against the  
wall, across from the one window. I realized  
that I’d never really looked at the hallway  
before, at what it actually looked like.

The carpet was green.

Against the ceiling, the crown  
molding chipped.

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I looked at Marcus. He was a little taller than me, with straight shoulders, a wiry frame.

“I appreciate it,” he said. “The best thing for it is things like chess—or get him talking about rocks—you know, the earth— mountains —that’s what he loves, things like that. Anything to keep his memory going.”

I nodded. “Sure,” I said.

I was missing something, but felt odd asking what it was. So we just stood there for a moment, a minute, hands drifting toward pockets.

## 15.1

*Money*, of course is a word; but so, too, the concept of money acts as does a word. Money is communication—exchange—symbolic. A dollar is like the

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word “is”: an equals sign. Power, too, acts a word—but power is not tangible.

## 15.2

Saturday night, a call from  
Ximena.

“Hey,” she says, “it’s Ximena.”

I’ve just come home, and am  
standing in the entrance of my apartment  
holding my phone, one shoe off, belt  
unbuckled.

The room is dark.

We arrange to meet up. Outside,  
snow-rain is falling, the death rattle of

winter. Sidewalks sluice slush, water running in cracks, coating the bottoms of pant-legs. Within five minutes of walking, my socks are wet.

No cabs are in sight, so I walk the back way—Adams Mill Road, climbing steep hills wet. My clothes are soaked through.

Coming into the restaurant, a small place—*Adam Express*, I see her standing looking at the menu.

“Jesus!” she says, seeing me,  
“you’re drenched!”

We order, then sit on stools,  
looking out on the street.

Fat flakes of snow.



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## 15.3

The food comes—kimchi chigae,  
rolls of sushi, pajeon.

Eating, I feel myself growing  
warm.

“What’re you doing in town?” I  
ask, spooning stew into my mouth.

She shrugs.

My thighs are cold, wet through  
the jeans.

Outside, a woman walks fast—  
then slips—then slows, lowering her head.

I can't really think of anything to say.

## 15.4

We walk up Mount Pleasant,  
down Park Road. Into the group house. A  
wide greenish thing, columns on the front, a  
porch.

The snow is in my bones.

We come into the main room, a  
man and woman sitting watching television.  
They nod.

“We'll find you some clothes,”  
says Ximena.

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I shake my head—I hate wearing other people's clothes.

She walks into the kitchen, and I follow. All I can think about is how I want to go home. But she's opened a bottle of burgundy, pouring me a glass, and I can't say no. So I smile at her and sip, again following her into the main room, standing against the radiator.

On the screen, a man and a woman are trying to solve a murder. We stand there for a while, behind the couch, the man and woman, drinking, watching the detectives.

## 15.5

“What do you do?” asks the man, looking back over the couch.

Ximena is in the kitchen, pouring second glasses of wine.

“I work for the Federal Government,” I say.

He nods.

“That’s Sebastian,” says Ximena, coming into the room, handing me my glass.

“I’m Cady,” says the woman.

“Fox,” I say.

“Are you a spy or something?”  
the woman asks.

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“No,” I say.

“Though he could be lying,” says  
Ximena.

They smile.

My clothes are cold, my skin is cold, my head is cold. I keep thinking about how I want to go home and change clothes, lie in bed, about how I hate these kinds of people, but I can't get myself to move. I drink more wine, trying to recapture the warmth from the bowl of Korean stew.

Ximena has talked me into staying. We're sitting around a rectangle table, playing spades.

“Are you a conservative?” says Sebastian, laying down a king of hearts.

He is looking at my clothes.

“No,” I say, tossing out a three of spades.

“Good,” he says.

Cady lays down a ten of spades.

“He's not anything,” says Ximena, tossing the queen of hearts.

“You can't be a republican,” says Cady, leading a seven of spades.

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Ximena folds down the jack of spades.

“Why’s that?” I ask, wondering about this obsession with republicans.

“Because,” says Sebastian, tossing out the king of spades, “you’re black—it would be voting against your interests.”

I looked at him. “Because what?”

“Being black and conservative,” he said, “that’s voting against your interests.”

“Who says I’m black?” I asked, laying down the ace. “And besides—I don’t vote.”

## 15.7

I didn't want to stay, I had to do anything not to stay there, so I went out, walking in the snow and slush, dark-wine drunk, Ximena insisting on coming.

We walked quiet, looking for a cab; when we found one, the driver shook his head.

“Too close,” he said.

“It's snowing,” I said.

He let me in.

“Go ahead and drive around,” I said, “take the long way.”



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He pulled out, and I looked through the window at Ximena gathering snow on her hair, her shoulders.

“Where you going?” he asked.  
I told him my address; he began driving.

“Which one you from?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?”

“Eritrea or Ethiopia?”

He smiled. “Eritrea—how did you know?”

“Because,” I said, grinning stupidly, “that’s where all cabdrivers here are from.”

He thought about this, driving fast through the snow.

“Yes,” he said finally, “that is true. But I am American now.”

Then he looked at me in the mirror.

“But what about you?” he asked.  
“Where are you from?”

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## 16.1

Showers came, washing away the snow. Ximena with short hair, outside my building. I walked down.

“How’d you find me?” I asked.

“Zach,” she said.

I tried to remember telling Mr. Knox my address; I couldn’t.

We walked up the hill to a deli. Ximena walked ahead, and I saw how small she was. She was wearing an old military jacket, jeans, sneakers blue and white scuffed brown.

Bagels, coffee, rain against the windows—inside *So’s Your Mom*, ordering. Ximena stood standing with her food, her cup, and I could tell that she wanted to go back to my apartment. I couldn’t think of any alternative. So we went back down the hill—inside, and up the elevator.

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She took off her shoes.

## 16.2

“We didn’t get a chance to talk last night—alone,” she began.

I was holding my bagel sandwich with two hands, eating. We were sitting across from each other—she on the chair, me on the couch, the coffee table between us.

“I want to know who you are, Fox. What drives you? What do you believe in?”

I sipped the coffee. Then took another bite.

“I guess—I believe in words—  
language,” I said, chewing.

“Well,” she said, as if she didn’t  
hear, “I believe in the environment. In  
nature. In the earth.”

She waited for me to say  
something, but I remained silent. I could tell  
that she wanted to rant, and I didn’t feel  
much like interrupting. Her eyes were  
fevered, her hair spiky from the rain, wet yet  
on her cheeks.

“It’s all gone to shit,” she said—  
she was talking fast, but leaving pauses, room  
for me to interrupt (I didn’t) and for her to  
take small bites of her bagel, “this planet—

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covered in human disease —overpopulation, using up all our resources, running all over the earth, smashing it to bits, digging it apart, trashing it, and killing ourselves in the process. Humans are a nasty, disgusting blight. We cause climate change, and we don't do anything about it. A human sees a mountain—and thinks, 'Fine! I'll have to tear it apart to see what's inside!' A human sees a river—and thinks, 'Fine! I'll have to dam it up, to use it for my own sake!' Humans take animals—and throw them in cages. The industrial revolution reverberates through every aspect of our existence.

Animals are now part of an assembly line for human consumption. The land is chewed up and spit out...”

She kept talking like that for a while, an hour or so, but I stopped listening. I looked down to eat, to drink, then looked up to watch her talk. Her eyes were boring—not like the busstop woman’s. When she took a bite, I noticed that she balled her left hand into a fist, using her right hand to grab and hold the bagel. She held her knees close together, leaning on them now and again with her forearms.



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## 16.3

College was full of firebrands; bad bourgeois kids who needed their milk. For some reason, these kinds of girls were drawn to me. Jeans torn, hair dirty disheveled, sandals, brown-framed glasses. They all wanted to convert me (from what, I know not)—proselytizing, preaching, staying all night till dawn. Perhaps it was my insouciance; girls love that (at least, those kinds of girls do).

“Globalization is an evil machine—the arm of capitalism...” I remember one girl saying.

“Abortion is...”

“The US is an imperialist monster...”

“Children are out there, starving in the streets...”

“The patriarchy is there, you just can’t see it...”

“White privilege shapes everything you do...”

I never really paid much attention.

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## 16.4

My roommate, a gregarious guy—Dustin—taught me how to drink. Before college, I'd never much experienced alcohol.

“Fox,” he said to me, “you need to get out of this room. When's the last time you even went to the dining hall?”

I worked in the dining hall.

“Yeah, but when's the last time you ate there?”

One night, around eleven, he comes in with three of our dormmates.

“Fox,” he says, putting his arm around me, “tonight we’re getting you drunk.”

And they did.

They piled me in jeep, and we went down to some bar outside town. Outside, the bar looked like a shack—vinyl siding falling off, an old wooden porch; inside, there must’ve been close to a hundred undergrads, all standing jostling about.

After about ten minutes, I snuck out the back. The few followed me.

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“You’re not getting away that easy, Fox.”

They pushed me in the jeep again, driving out backroads to the country.

“See, what you don’t know,” said my roommate, “is that we’ve got plans for you.”

We parked at the top of a hill, overlooking the valley.

“Here,” said my roommate, handing me a bottle, “drink this.”

I looked at the label—  
Stolichnaya. I drank—white burning the

insides of my cheeks, my throat. My eyes watered.

“Drink some more,” he said.

I drank.

We got out of the jeep. The sky was dark blue.

“Drink some more,” he said. He kept saying that all night.

I drank again.

## 16.5

Eventually, I started to talk.

“I like to let people think I’m stupid,” I said, matter-of-factly, looking down over the valley. I was half-listening for them,

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but they were letting me ramble. And that was ok, because it was coming out regardless.

I looked down at the bottle in my hands. The next day, I wouldn't remember any of this; it was only later that it would come back to me, and I would decide to never allow myself again to get that drunk around others. I still get drunk even today, but it is always circumscribed.

“People like to categorize other people,” I said. “They like to look at groups of people and put them in boxes—to say, ‘Oh, he’s a *this*, or she’s a *that*.’ They like to

think that other people are stupid—that they’re the only smart ones around.”

I drank.

“What makes people happy,” I said, “is to control things —animals, machines, the land, paperwork. But what they like best is to control other people. If they can’t physically control them, they’ll use other means—animals, machines, the land, paperwork. Social pressure, political pressure, psychological pressure.

“Or—happy—I don’t know if I’d call it *happiness*, really though. Humans can’t be happy unless they learn to live with other people; but we can’t really ever learn to



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live with them. We have to use social conventions—tricks—in order to put up with others.”

I was drinking more often now, watching as a cloud flirted with the moon. The blinking red lights of airplanes cut across and between the glowing yellows and white of stars.

“But it’s all about categorization, really. Humans can’t think without categorizing—it’s physically impossible. Our brains are evolutionally evolved to think in boxes. That’s—that is the fundamental flaw in the human machine. We need to think in

boxes in order to think—to process time, events, language. But thinking in boxes necessarily limits our thinking.”

With a tilt of the head, I finished the bottle. Dustin was waiting, handing me another. I could see that he wanted to say something, yet held off.

“Go ahead,” I remember saying to him, “let me talk. I don’t give a shit. I don’t even fucking know any of you. In five years, we won’t even know each other.”

He just smiled—a look of almost wry disappointment.

“See—the look on your face, you’re categorizing me,” I said. “You can’t

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help it. Sure, I'm categorizing you, too. Fuck knows, I try not to—but it's just not possible. See, that's the thing—it's not something we can control, most of it. It's unconscious—preconscious, whatever you want to call it. Instinctive. It's all about survival of the fittest. When I look in the woods, my eyes have to be able to visually categorize—to separate the leaves of the tree from the leopard. Where does the leopard begin and the leaves begin? Without the ability to categorize, I wouldn't be able to tell. Without categorization, we couldn't

survive—the world would be just a meaningless jumble, a hodgepodge.”

I drank again, looking at the sky. For a while, I watched the planes flying.

It must’ve been ten minutes or so before Dustin finally said something.

“You’re one of those philosophical drunks,” he said—then chuckled.

“Mm,” I said.

He took the bottle—drank. I turned to look at the other guys—sleeping in the grass.

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“So,” said Dustin, “go ahead then—categorize me. What am I? Am I the leaves or—or a leopard?”

“Neither,” I said, taking the bottle, drinking, “you’re more like a—you hunt in a pack,” I said, gesturing behind us, “with these guys—you’re always together right? So you’re more like a pack animal—a wolf—a killer whale. But you’re not like wolves, you don’t ever leave the group.”

I drank.

“Killer whales are different,” I said. “They stay together forever—for generations. Wolves change packs—like

baboons. And killer whales communicate with each other—they have a secret language—whale songs—that only the other members of their group can know. A cant. That's you—that's how you guys talk to each other. You surround your prey, and you cut them off."

He was looking at me intently now, narrowing his eyes.

"Problem is," I said, "you can't always coordinate your attacks." Again, I gestured behind me. "And you can't catch all your prey."

I looked at him full on.

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“You know what kind of prey is the easiest for pack animals to catch?”

He shook his head.

“No,” he said.

“The kind that tries to run away. If you run away, the wolves can pick at your ankles—the orcas chase whales until they tire out. But if the whales stand their ground—or the bison—facing the pack head-on—then they have a chance.”

I stood, stretching my arms.

“The best thing in the world,” I said, looking down on him, “is to be underestimated. To have other people think

that they can tire you out, surround you, pick at your ankles. So I go ahead and let them think that.”

“And then what?”

But even then, as drunk as I was—the drunkest I’ve ever been—I still had the presence of mind not to answer him. I changed the subject, then I threw up, and, after a while, the others woke up and we went looking for a 24-hour diner, somewhere to fill ourselves with eggs and pancakes, orange juice and coffee.



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Ximena seemed always to have a plan in mind, a schedule to keep—the contents of which I remained ever ignorant. Though it was raining, she was determined to go outside. She was moving fast down the hill, toward Dupont.

“People hate the rain,” she said, turning to me, holding her palm out, “but it’s just rain—it’s water—it’s beautiful.”

She continued walking, talking as we came toward Florida.

“Without rain, humans couldn’t survive—we’d die out.”

We stood at the light. Cars moved across, wipers and headlights, skimming the water sideways.

We crossed.

“I have a love-hate relationship with cities,” she continued. “Cities are the refuse of civilization—where nature comes to die—where humans shit on the earth.”

We crossed at Q Street, heading down into the metro.

As we rode down the escalator, she turned back to look up at me, the rain hitting her in the face for a moment before we entered the tunnel below.

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“But I love cities,” she said. “I can’t help it—it’s where I grew up, where I’m from.”

“Where *are* you from?” I asked; then, as we stepped onto the metro, “Where are we going?”

“I was born in Mexico City,” she said. “But I grew up in Houston—and later, I moved to LA.”

We were standing. She took a look around at the other passengers.

“I wanted to show you something,” she said.

## 16.7

We changed lines—coming up out of the Navy Yard station. We stopped into a coffee shop, grabbing cups warm.

Then she was back out there in the rain, yet determined, marching through the drops.

“It’s always the same,” she said, “humans pushing the limits of the environment. Why do we always have to push the limits? Why can’t we just live comfortably—sustainably—within our means?”

We were coming along the backside of the baseball stadium—the

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industrial section of the city. I remembered that I had tickets for a game someday with Rong and her husband. For a while, Ximena stopped talking, pulling her jacket close against her shoulders.

Steam rolled out of my coffee.

## 16.8

“This is what I wanted to show you,” she said—pointing out to the river.

Along the shore, large machines rested on torn-up earth. In the distance, across the water, lay Anacostia.

“Can you imagine—this river is filled with trash?”

From the look on her face, I could see that she wanted me to have an epiphany—to feel some deep feeling about the horrible nature of humankind; but I was simply bored.

She resumed talking, lecturing me about the river, about humans, pollution.

At some point, I interrupted to ask, “How should we live? Should we all be like the Unabomber—living primitive lives without technology?”

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Which was the wrong thing to say; for some twenty minutes or more, she outlined a theory of environmental practice.

As she spoke, I drank my coffee, now lukewarm, the rain hitting against the back of my neck, my shoulders. I looked at Ximena and realized that I liked being with her, in spite of her penchant for rhetoric and platitudes.

## 17.1

Marcus was again at Lyon's place.

"Hey," he said, "come on in."

I followed him inside. In the entranceway, he turned back to me.



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“Let me ask you something,” he said. “You know how to play tonk?”

“Tonk?”

He nodded. “I’ll show you.”

“Ok,” I said, following him into the living room.

Lyon was sitting at the table, looking over a chess board.

“Hey, Pop,” said Marcus, picking up the board, “we’ll finish this some other time. We’re gonna play some tonk.”

Lyon watched the board as if the pieces were being pulled from his mind. His eyes stayed there, even after Marcus set it

down on the bookcase. Marcus walked across the room, into the kitchen, opening a drawer and grabbing a deck of cards.

He came in and sat down. I followed suit.

“Ok,” he said, shuffling, “now normally, we put a little money down—but let’s wait on it. You know how to play rummy?”

I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “It’s kinda like rummy. You with us, Pop?”

Lyon was staring at the chess board. Marcus snapped his fingers, and Lyon attended.

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“Face cards,” said Marcus, looking at me, “are ten points. Aces are one point, and everything else is what it says—so an eight is worth eight points, six is worth six points, and so on. Good?”

“Good.”

“Alright. So—what’s next? Alright—so like rummy, when you get three or four together, then you put them down on the table. So, if I have three 3s, or 3-4-5 of clubs, then I put them down. Like rummy, right?”

I nodded, glancing over at Lyon. He was staring at the table—his eyes clouded.

“And—and you can add to the other players’ piles, right? So, if I have 3-4-5 of clubs, and you have the 6 of clubs, then you can put it down.”

“Got it,” I said.

“We each get five cards, and you draw just like rummy,” he said, still shuffling.

He looked off to the side for a second, his hands slowly playing with the cards.

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“Oh,” he said, “right—so you got the points, right? Face cards—ten, ace—one, and everything else is what it is. If you get dealt 49 or 50 points, then you win straight off. It happens sometimes—just luck. That’s an automatic win. But it only really matters if we put money on the game.”

He paused—then began dealing out five cards each.

“So, the goal is to have less points in your hand than anyone else. When it’s your turn, you can either quit or keep going. If you quit, that means you think you’ve got less points in your hand than us. If you

don't quit, then you've got to pick up a card."

He paused again, thinking.

"So," I said, "when I pick up, can I put something down?"

"Yes," he said, nodding, "that's what I was trying to think of earlier—when you pick up, you can put something down, but you can't go out until next turn. You have to go out before you pick up."

"And I discard?"

"Yes. Or, if you have nothing left, you win."

I nodded, thinking.

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“Let’s play a hand,” said Marcus,  
“and see what happens.”

We looked over our cards.

## 17.2

A few hands in, Lyon’s mind began to wander. Marcus paid it no heed, taking it as par for the course; when Lyon’s turn came, Marcus would lean over and bend back his father’s cards, then play the turn; then, in turn, play his own hand.

“You see,” he said to me at one point, gesturing to Lyon, “why we can’t play with money.”

I went my turn, picking up a six of diamonds—nothing.

“What are those rocks over there?” I asked, pointing to the bookcase.

“Those are his,” said Marcus.

“What kinds of rocks are those?” he asked Lyon, leaning forward, slightly raising his voice.

I began thinking back, trying to figure out why I’d never noticed, never seen Lyon like this. *Had I? Was he like this before?* No, he wasn’t, I decided. He was sharp—quick.



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Marcus stood, going to the bookcase and grabbing a rock. It was small and black—rough looking.

“Here—what’s this?” he asked, holding the rock out to Lyon.

Lyon slowly lifted his hand, taking the rock.

“It’s a black diamond, right Pops?”

Lyon held the rock close to his right eye.

“Carbonado,” he said.

Marcus nodded, sitting, looking at me. “I remember that one,” he said.

“From Central Africa,” said Lyon.

### 17.3

Marcus followed me out into the hall, pulling out cigarettes.

“Let’s go down for a bit,” he said, and we rode the elevator out to the exit.

Outside, the air was calm.

“I’ve never seen him like that,” I said, and he nodded.

He lit a cigarette, slowly inhaling, holding it close against the back of the knuckle.

The world was wet.

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“What did he do for a living?” I asked.

“He taught geology,” said Marcus, exhaling.

“Where?”

“Oh—all around,” he said, inhaling—exhaling.

He looked at me. “You should come down sometime—play cards. We’ve got a game on Wednesday nights.”

“Alright,” I said.

He smoked some more.

“It comes and goes, comes and goes,” he said. “One day he’s fine—the next,

he's gone. If you go see him, try to talk about things he likes—things he remembers, like rocks and geology. Do you know anything about it—geology?"

I shook my head. "Nothing," I said.

"No," he said, shaking his head, "me neither. I never really understood it."

He picked off a piece of tobacco from the tip of his tongue. I looked at the cigarette and realized that it was hand-rolled. He saw me looking and tossed the cigarette aside.

"I should quit," he said, halfheartedly.

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A car drove past, braking as a bicyclist sped by.

We exchanged numbers and shook hands, walking in opposite directions.

## 18.1

The only way to conclusively deceive others is to first deceive ourselves. Self-deception is the penultimate step, then, in convincing others of the lie. Many criminals who claim innocence very likely

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believe it to be so. They have told that lie to themselves so often that they have come to believe it; they *are* the lie. In fact, we, all of us, lie to ourselves day in and day out. We tell ourselves that we believe this or that to be the case, when in fact we know very well that we *do not* believe it.

Chimpanzees, too, self-deceive. In the wild, a chimpanzee, Kara, was observed repeatedly grooming the two highest-ranking males (Zed and Xavier). Each chimpanzee group develops a hierarchy, with a group of dominant males at the top. Other members of the group often cater to

these males. In the beginning of this relationship, it was obvious that Kara was grooming these males in order to achieve preference through rank. Grooming gave her a kind of power-by-association. Zed and Xavier would allow Kara to do pretty much whatever she pleased. But, after the years passed, Kara began to believe that she was powerful simply because of her own innate ability. She lied to herself, telling herself that her rank was a byproduct of some inner quality, when, in fact, it was always only a result of her affiliation with high-ranking males. For a while, this self-deception allowed Kara to manipulate lower-ranking



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members of the group. But, eventually, this led to her downfall (Kara was killed by a powerful up-and-coming male, Grady).

In a way, self-deception is key to the performance of everyday tasks. We need to deceive ourselves, otherwise we would spend all of our days tormented with guilt, rolling around on the floor with our head in our hands. Lying to ourselves allows us to set aside the contradictions within us, to go about doing mundane things. We do this willingly, because we always believe that we will remember the lie—that we will always know what is true about ourselves and what

is false. It is only the daily drumbeat of the lie that encroaches on our selfhood. It begins as a simple obvious lie: “Oh, I know that I didn’t invent that—he invented it. But I’ll just say that I invented it for now. I know the real truth.” Until, one day, we forget that truth.

## 18.2

Congress passes ideas; those ideas are realized within the actual working government via the *Federal Register* and finalized in the *Code of Federal Regulations* (what we call *Code 2* or CFR). Government agencies translate the ideas of Congress into

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the everyday working languages of their respective departments (known as *administrative agencies*). This is the cloud of bureaucracy.

For example: Senators debate “the right to privacy” (an idea) as realized on the internet, and they pass a law related to the “data mining” of citizens. In the case of “data mining,” most every Government Department would be implicated. The FDA, for instance, is considering allowing prescription drug companies to data mine citizens’ medical records. So, when it comes to writing the data mining law into the CFR,

every Department will want to have a say. The two-step process (from *The Code* to *Code 2*, or from *Stat.* to the *Register*), the actual details of that law, the hundreds of pages, will be edited mostly by Mally, Rong, and I (along with a slew of staffers, lobbyists, and congressional aides). This is the daily part of my job, outside of our negotiations between administrative agencies.

In practice, the actual day-to-day interpretations of the law are often *ad hoc*, context dependent; these interpretations are occasionally challenged in court. I say *occasionally*, because most of the time no one outside the government really cares about

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these interpretations. The challenges come where government interpretations hurt industry (Some examples: the FDA defines tobacco as a “drug,” and irritates the tobacco industry; the EPA defines “clean air”, and irritates the coal industry; Agriculture defines “processed cheese,” and irritates...; DHS defines “day planner,” and irritates...etc). In order to ward off conflicting interpretations between government agencies and corporations, Mally brings lobbyists into the process of writing *Code 2*.

## 18.3

A fresh Monday, Mally strode in  
and asked me to lunch. He first dawdled,  
meandering, sitting on my desk, looking out  
on early Spring. I followed his line of sight.

Blossoms budding on branches.

“It’s been a while,” he was saying,  
pensive, “hasn’t it?”

I agreed.

We went out into the sweet  
singing afternoon, sun dancing while birds  
chirped, etc. Mally had freckles abundant.  
*Glory be to God, I thought, for dappled  
things...for rose-moles all in stipple upon  
trout that swim.*

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We were drawn to the basin—the cherry blossoms on the verge of pinking. Standing there, the two of us inhaled the sweet Spring air.

“This is my favorite time of year,” said Mally. “I wish we didn’t have to work.”

And with an inhale-exhale he was business again, hailing a cab, taking us over to Penn Quarter. Everywhere I looked, everyone looked like a banker. I wondered if they all shopped at the same clothier.

We walked in, and Mally stopped to talk to the maitre d’—then we were coming back to a table, two women and a

man standing to greet us, and I recognized Mr. Knox signaling me not to say anything, to make on as if I didn't know him; without knowing why, really, I went along, Mally making introductions all around: Ms. Sally Carlisle, Ms. Vanessa Smith, and Mr. Zachary Knox.

## 18.4

I forget sometimes how adept Mally is at his job.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” he said, his throat sounding rough, “this weather has been harsh on my throat...”



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He was quite the actor, our Mally. One moment a popinjay, the next a phlegmatic old banker. Again, I was brought back to that photograph: Mally smiling/sinister, I realized, was not quite correct. He was Mally multifaceted—sickly, solicitous, or sangfroid, depending upon what the situation warranted. All things to all men and women alike: a man's man, and a woman's woman. Each mask befitting the company kept. *Was he ever really ill?* I wondered. *What could how Mally presented himself with me tell me about how he saw me?*

The others present were, in each their own way, mirrors of Mally. They danced their verbal dance, Mally teaching them the steps along the way. They spoke with such affectation that it was almost as if they were talking in code.

## 18.5

The waiter came.

“What’s the fish for today?” asked Mally.

“We have snapper and swordfish.”

“Swordfish it is.”

“The sea bass,” said Ms. Smith.

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“The brussels sprouts risotto,”  
said Mr. Knox.

“The beef tenderloin,” said Ms.  
Carlyle.

I sat there staring at the menu.  
“Could I have the scallops?” I  
asked.

The waiter nodded, taking the  
menus each. Mally, meanwhile, was ordering  
a bottle of wine.

“The weather is wonderful,” said  
Ms. Carlyle, gazing out the window.

“Hopeful,” said Ms. Smith.

“I feel,” said Mally, “that rain is coming.”

“Climate change,” said Mr. Knox. “Global warming is causing a flux in the seasons.”

“It’s April,” I said.

They ignored me.

“Climate change is a dreadful thing,” said Ms. Smith.

“What we need,” said Ms. Carlyle, “is scientific research. We need research universities to be able to do their work. The University of Alaska, for instance, is spearheading an initiative to research the glacial ice sheets.”

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“But we also need alternative energy,” said Mr. Knox, pointing at the table. “Green energy.”

At this point, I was no longer attempting to contribute to the conversation. The wine had come, so I was sitting back and listening, drinking, occasionally looking over at other tables—Senators, aides, lobbyists—and out the window.

They talked for a while more, until I heard Mally asking:

“But what *is* green energy?”

“Ah,” said Miss Smith. “That is the question, isn’t it?”

“That sounds like a question of definition,” said Mr. Knox.

And, as they all three paused to look at me, the waiter came, bringing plates steaming.

## 18.6

“So that was a setup,” I said to Mally, on the way back to the office.

Mally smiled—then looked me straight on. “Fox,” he said, “everything in life is a setup.”

“Is there legislation upcoming on green energy?”

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“It’s being talked about, yes—  
*upcoming upcoming.*”

“What is it about, exactly?”

He hesitated, then said, “A  
comprehensive tax rebate for green energy.”

“And who do Ms. Smith, Ms.  
Carlysle, and Mr. Knox represent?”

“They each represent—*various  
concerned interests.* You know that.”

We were walking off our lunch,  
coming across the front of the Capitol.

Mally, I just noticed, was wearing sneakers.

I thought for a moment.

“Ms. Carlysle,” I said, “let me think—Ms. Carlysle represents the University of Alaska, and I’m guessing one of the senators from there.”

Mally grinned. “Very good,” he said. “What else?”

“Ms. Smith—something to do with energy—what?”

“Ms. Smith works for what’s called the *energy lobby*. She’s one of the most powerful lobbyists in this city. *Knows her scotch*, as we like to say.”

“Knows her scotch?”

“Mm.”

I let it pass.



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“And Mr. Knox?” I asked.

“Mr. Knox works for a variety of interests. Today, he was representing the *environmental lobby*. He’s one of the up-and-comers, working for a—a variety of interests, as I said.”

We continued walking. Mally had grown contemplative, his head bowing, his pace slowing as we neared the office, waiting for traffic before we crossed.

“So who won?” I asked.

He looked up—almost startled.

“Won?” he asked.

“Somebody has to win, right?”

We crossed, the light counting down. I could see that the question had truly puzzled him.

We came into the office, the elevator.

“Nobody wins?” I asked.

“Everybody wins?”

He pushed the button.

“It depends on the meaning of *win*,” he said, finally—a slight smile forming upon his lips.

## 18.7

Afterwards, I went back to my office, beginning research on the meaning of

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*energy, green, and green energy*, my preliminary notes:

*“green energy”: energy that is either: a) environmentally sustainable or b) environmentally friendly. In this section, “green energy” is similar to, but not the same as “clean energy”, “sustainable energy”, “renewable energy”, and “environmentally friendly energy”. Green energy has zero impact upon the environment. This means that it has little to no pollution. While green energy may sound like a*

*primary energy source, in fact green energy is always a secondary source. The primary sources of green energy are:*

*1) clean energy, 2) sustainable energy, 3) renewable energy, and 4) environmentally friendly energy.*

*Take, for instance, hydroelectric power—a renewable energy.*

*Hydroelectric power is not, in and of itself, green. This is because hydroelectric power has many negative environmental impacts (note that this contrasts with the popular image of hydroelectric power as*

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*green), including methane emissions and damage to local ecosystem.*

*There is no such thing as green energy in the real world. Green energy, then, is an idea, a byproduct of one of the 4 types of energy listed above, a unit of exchange...*

## **18.8**

Sometimes, self-lies end up becoming self-fulfilling. Self-deception does not necessarily mean self-harm; in fact, most self-deception ends up working for our own betterment. The most basic self-lie is

performed in the service of self-motivation—ego-boosting. “I can do it,” we say. This is a lie. But, over time, this lie transforms—becomes self-fulfilling; over time, we *can* do it (whatever *it* may be). Looking back at our progress, our transformation, it seems to us that we always could do it, when, in fact, in the beginning, we could not. The lie shapes our memory of ourselves. The final step in self-deception is the metamorphosis of our own memories of our past selves, our past thoughts. We lie to ourselves about what we used to think about ourselves. This lie aligns the past with the present. Self-deception, then, is necessarily an ongoing process. We

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become the lie. There is nothing so sinister in this, for we are all liars. We qualify this by referring to these lies as *little lies* or *social lies* or *necessary lies*. But there is no need for such qualifications (likely born out of guilt, a mechanism of social regulation). Lying is part of what makes us an intelligent species. It is the *sine qua non* of social order. Without lies, we would all have to live separate lives; and without each other, we would not have any of the benefits of society—including language; and without language, we could not think or, in turn, lie...

## 19.1

The end of April—cold, soggy.  
The rain held off, the sky yet overcast.  
Saturday, riding the metro down to the Navy  
Yard. On the train, I thought briefly of  
Ximena. The compartment was packed—



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crowds of fans wearing jerseys red, blue, white. Interspersed, I noticed a few hats with an overlapping S and F—San Francisco Giants. Rong is on the phone, directing me—I come up out of the metro and see Bob standing against the concrete wall. He smiles, walking over to greet me.

“Where are you?” asks Rong into the phone.

“I’m shaking your husband’s hand,” I say.

“Good to see you,” he says.

“Good to see you, Bob,” I say, smiling, hanging up.

We mill about for a while,  
looking over stands selling goods cheap. I  
buy a bottle of water. Bob buys a hat with a  
W on it.

We follow the crowd, ushered in  
through the gates, looking up at signs  
directing us where to go.

“Where’s our seats?” asks Rong.  
Bob looks at the tickets.

## 19.2

Rong was yelling, pumping her  
fist. “Run, dammit! Run!”

She was wearing a red jersey and  
hat, a plastic bottle of water in her left hand.

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As she yelled, she gave a little jump, yelling alternately in Mandarin and English, watching the play at the plate. I noticed then that she had a line of black paint under her eyes.

Bob stood silent, smiling when I looked over at him.

Between innings, I volunteered to get food, refills. Bob decided to come along. As we made the turn down the steps, I looked back up at Rong, moving to stand as the team came back onto the field, now yelling, “1-2-3 inning, come on, boys!”

Bob caught my look, again  
smiling at me.

Walking down the stairs, he said,  
“She’s crazy, right?”

When I turned to look at him  
again, he was staring ahead, his eyes lit, his  
face beaming with pride.

### 19.3

“Written law is finite, lived law is  
infinite.”

These, Rong’s first words to me  
on my first day of the job. She spoke with  
an impassive mien. I was a bit intimidated,  
and for a moment I wondered if this was

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how she would always talk—in proverbs, aphorisms; then she broke out into a smile, shaking my hand, introducing herself.

It took me most of that first year to understand Rong's sense of humor. I remember passing by her office once, when I heard her chuckling to herself. When I looked in, she waved for me to come over, pointing out the window.

“Look!” she said, almost whispering.

I followed her line of sight: outside, on the ledge, a pigeon attempted to walk—then fell on its side, then stood and

repeated the process. Each time the pigeon slumped over, Rong would laugh a little louder. When she looked over at me, I saw pure exhilaration on her face. I admit that I felt envious—so I laughed along with her, and, within a few minutes, was feeling the better for it.

## 19.4

Rong deals primarily with revision. More than anyone else I've ever met, Rong thinks like a lawyer. I've tried, numerous times, to get her to debate the morality of a particular event—always to no

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avail. I'd circle round and round, always with her pinned fast to the law.

There was a story in the news once about a girl kidnapped, held in a prison for five years—raped daily, etc. Eventually, she got out and, after she went home, her father returned and killed the kidnapper.

“Murder—premeditation,” said Rong.

Another news story once—a corporation filtering funding through various loopholes, moving outside the country, then

back in again, eventually paying no taxes. We were slow in the office, so Rong and I dug through the law, finding that everything the corporation did was legal (they used a wide range of tax credits).

“But is it morally right?” I asked.

“What the fuck does that mean?” she said.

We had endless conversations like this.

## 19.5

The game was a blowout, the Nationals losing at one point by six runs. I looked around the stadium at the empty



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seats, people standing walking leaving. Rong was red-cheeked, drinking water, still fiercely cheering. Bob had his arm around her, yelling in unison. Below us was a family of five, two little boys and a girl slightly older; they would occasionally turn back and cheer with Rong and Bob, one of the little boys wearing a Giants cap, swinging a red plastic baseball bat. I closed my lids for a little and listened to the sounds of the stadium, to Rong and Bob, the family of five, the organ playing, airplanes passing above, feeling the cold air of early spring, sleeping for a while before Bob bumped my elbow, telling me

that it was time to go, the game's over, they lost.

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## 20.1

In town, growing up, there was an old man who used to sit outside his house on Pine Street. He usually had a dog with him, or another old man or two. He was

always chewing on the end of a cigar, sitting or rocking on the porch, a ballcap on his head. Whenever I would walk by he would glare at me—slowly taking out his cigar, narrowing his eyes, and cursing under his breath. When I was a child, I feared him; when I grew older, I hated him.

“Move along,” my Mom would say when I would stop to glare back at the old man.

## 20.2

I was sitting on a brick square at 18<sup>th</sup> and Columbia, in that small brick park, watching the buses, the cabs, the pedestrians

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cross and wait, cross and wait, lost in thought. It was seven o'clock in the evening, and the intersection was busy, electric with the energy of young souls. So I just sat there for a while, allowing my eyes to glaze over, the exhaust from the passing buses occasionally hitting me in the face.

In the back of my mind, I heard a tap, tap—shuffle, tap—shuffle—a man sitting next to me holding a cane. Lyon.

I looked at him full.

“Mm,” he said.

“What’s up?” I asked.

He nodded, resting his hands on each other on top of the cane.

Everyone passing was talking—to either each other, or to their cell phones.

We sat there for a while more, absorbing the atmosphere.

## 20.3

“I could go for a drink,” I said finally, slapping my thighs as I stood. I looked at Lyon.

“Coming?” I asked.

He thought about it for a second, then jerked up his head.

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“Alright, then,” I said, looking up and down the street.

We began walking. At first, I was impatient, almost irritated with his slow pace. But, after a fashion, I allowed my mind to wander; and shortly, we were walking down into the depths, a bar underneath the street, empty of customers.

We found a corner, a small table.

We drank for a while, listening to the bar, and I realized that Lyon was talking, and again I was allowing his words to run through my ear and out my other ear, a river of memory passing through.

I looked at him.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“Louisiana,” he said, looking at the bar, the men seated there. “They sent me there for my first fieldwork. *I was born there*, as they say.”

He shook his head, looking at me.

“What does that tell you?” he asked, “Sending a geologist to Louisiana. The Delta—I knew what it meant. When you’re a geologist, especially a young geologist, you want to go to the mountains. But they sent me down there.”

He drank, looking at me again.



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“Louisiana! You don’t learn geology in Louisiana!”

## 20.4

He talked about the fault lines of Baton Rouge, the river delta sinking the crust, forming Louisiana, covering salt domes, the mountain ranges that used to connect the Appalachians to Texas, Ouachita, South America sinking and creating the Gulf—I only caught about a third of what he said, and I only understood about another third of that. He was rambling, drinking, using jargon—gesturing.

I was drinking, too, looking at him, trying to catch what he said, to remain focused. It was all a jumble in my head.

“The Gulf was dry,” he was saying.

He stopped, looking at me—realizing, perhaps, that it was all passing over me like so much wind.

“Listen,” he said, “you need to pull your mind back. Everything you see on earth is just a representation of what goes on underneath the surface. Hills and valleys, waterfalls—soft soil and hard rocks. Mountains, oceans, deserts, roads, farms, lakes, forests, swamps, rivers, islands, grass,

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dirt, sand, trees, bridges, tunnels, skyscrapers, houses.

“The rocks shape what kinds of people we are. Are you a farmer or a banker? A nomad or a fisherman?

Washington was built on the fall line—you can see shadows, terraces, of the escarpment in Malcolm X Park—a cut off between the hardness of the piedmont and the softness of the soil. It’s Northern and Southern. The southern, agrarian, going out into PG County, and the northern industrial, going up into Montgomery County. These

different ways of living are shaped by the geology.

“Humans have only been around for the blink of an eye. The earth is old. Try to think for a second of a million years. See if you can think of it. Better still, try to think of a single second—a minute—an hour. Twenty-four hours. A day. Seven days—a week. A month. A year.

“One hundred years—everyone you know is dead. One hundred thousand years—everyone you’ve read about is dead. One million years is just a speck on the earth—it’s over like that. Mountains rise and fall. Glaciers flood the earth and recede.

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Meteors crash to the earth, and dust clouds the sky. Dinosaurs die. One, two, three million years. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred million years. The earth is over four billion years old. So what is a war? Death? A human life? Why should I care what I have for lunch? For dinner? I was born, married, I had children, my wife died, and now I'm here, still alive. A dust mote. What're you—you're just a piece of dust."

He put his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm just dust," I said, convinced.

"That's right," he said. "Switch your mind over—see if you can do it."

We drank.

“The problem is,” he said, “humans just don’t live long enough. We can only think a hundred years at a time. We’re able to perceive time in seconds, which dooms us to count them.”

He talked more, but I was elsewhere—a drift in time.

## **20.5**

As a kid, my mom would take me into town to get my hair cut. The barbershop was a small place, the size roughly of half a school classroom. To get

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there, you had to walk down Pine Street, just past the old man sitting on his porch.

I remember our first visit, walking past him sitting with his son. The old man was chewing on a cigar, and he mumbled something.

“He’s just a kid, Dad,” said the son.

I turned my head, and saw the son smiling at me, glancing over at his father; the old man glared at me, ignoring my mother.

“He’s just a kid,” said his son again.

“Move along,” said my mother, ushering me down into the barbershop.

## 20.6

“I ain’t seen hair like this in a long time,” he said the first time, grinning at me in the mirror.

In the back, my mom was smoldering.

“Not since the service, leastways,” he said, winking at her. “My time in Dixie.”

After that first visit, my mom would drop me off, leaving to run errands.

The barber was a burly old man, always playing oldies on the radio. Chuck Berry, Elvis, Buddy Holly. He’d sing along as he trimmed hair, sometimes sliding his feet along the black-and-white tiles.



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*“But-I-got wise—you’rrre the devil in disguise, oh yes you are,”* twisting away from my head—black wingtips scissoring across the floor—then coming back and buzzing the hair short.

Mr. Klopper, his name was. He would talk about his life, or about old movies, music, talking to me as if I were an adult. Of course, sometimes an adult was in the room, sitting waiting, next in line. Or, other times, I would be the one sitting, waiting while Mr. Klopper danced his danced and trimmed their hair, spinning a tale all the while.

## 20.7

It took a spate of effort to pull Lyon out of geologic time. He lived in the Cambrian, Ordovician, Devonian, Jurassic. When he was talking about the current century, it was always in skips and jumps—the 1940's skipping to the 1960's—the 90's skipping to last week.

“The cold won't go away,” I said, referring to the drawn-out April.

He thought about this for a moment.

“You don't know cold,” he said.

“Hagaru-ri—that's cold. The coldest place on earth. *The Reservoir*.”

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He moved to continue talking, as if he were going to tell a tale—then stopped—then again was lost in thought.

“When was that?” I asked, trying to keep him within the Holocene.

He looked at me. “What? Oh—that was a long time ago.”

He drank.

“You know,” he said, “I’ve always dreamed of going back there to study the mountains. North Korea—the whole country is made up of mountains. Except for Pyongyang. It’s a geologist’s playground.”

## 20.8

On the walk home, Lyon began fading, talking about his sons, the ice caps, his wife's secret snack (corn nuts), seafloor spreading.

"I loved that woman," he said, stopping to look at me.

"I believe it," I said, moving him forward.

"But goddamn—she had a temper."

I remained silent, waiting for him to continue.

"She was one of those silent ones," he said. "You could never really tell whether she was angry or not. Thirty years, and I

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could never tell whether she was simmering or cooling off. Struck like a snake—a cobra. Before you knew it, you were on your back, begging for mercy. But other times, she'd put her hand on you—and you'd expect fire, when she'd give you love, a rub on the shoulder, the back of my neck.”

He stopped, rubbing his collar—as if she were there, behind him, pushing him forward. For a moment, I expected him to turn around and talk to her, to say something over his shoulder. But the next moment, he was continuing on, limping toward the front door of the building.

## 20.9

I liked waiting best, because I would get to read the old magazines Mr. Klopper had laying about. Against the far wall, there was a long wooden bench with a red leather cushion, at the end of which were stacks of them—*Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*. I would sit on the bench and flip through their pages, looking at the old pictures, the advertisements, the photographs of wars, the political cartoons (when I grew older, I would read through the articles). Half of the magazines were torn, coming apart at the spine, so that I would have to lift

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the edges gingerly, careful not to extend the tear-line.

I remember one ad in particular—*Genuine Smooth Tasting Smoking Tobacco!* The image was of two black men drawn in caricature—minstrelsy: big red lips sticking protruding, dark shiny skin, eyes bugging out. The man on the left was wearing a red cap and grinning, lighting a cigarette, while the man on the right had white hair and was digging in his pocket, a fishing pole leaning against his back. I was fascinated by the picture—staring at it for over ten minutes. Then suddenly my mom was standing next

to me, yelling, “What is that!” and taking the picture over to Mr. Klopper who was laughing, saying, “It’s just an old ad, that’s all, Mrs. Gray.” Then she was leading me out, and I was asking, “Can I have that picture, Mom?” But she just marched on, walking toward the car, pretending that she didn’t hear me. On the way home, she bought me an ice cream, and I forgot about the advertisement.



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## 21.1

I woke smelling blood, ringing in my ears—went to the cabinet for pills, the kitchen for a glass of water, answering the phone.

“Hello?”

“Foxy!”

*Shit.* Only one person ever called me that.

“Carlos?”

“Shit, man—you know they still call me the Jackal. What the fuck you up to?”

“Just waking up. How’d you get my number?”

“I looked you up, man. Foxy—what the fuck—how long’s it been, man?”

“Dunno.”

I walked from the kitchen, pulling open the blinds. Sun was burning wet off the sidewalks.

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“So, listen, Foxy—what you doing today?”

“Today? What is it—Sunday?”

“Shit, Foxy—what’d you do last night? Hell yeah, it’s Sunday. And I’m in town, so I’m coming by, alright?”

“You’re in DC?”

## **21.2**

Noon, walking outside the school, down toward the gas station. I am carrying my camera, looking for photographs, when I hear a voice.

“Hey, don’t I know you?”

I turn to see a skinny kid wearing glasses. I don't recognize him. I shrug.

"Fox—right?"

I nod. He grins, points.

"Yeah, Fox—I knew it. I know you. You're a senior. I'm a junior—you cutting out, too? My name's Carlos—but they call me the Jackal."

He did almost look like a jackal—angular face, ears sticking out, a toothbrush frame.

Soon, we are walking together, down into the convenience store, buying soda.

"You kinda look Latino, Foxy," says Carlos, "but I can tell you're not. Are you?"

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I shake my head. I am trying to think of a way to get rid of him.

“Naw, I thought so. There’s only like—a hundred Latinos in this town, and I know ‘em all.”

He laughed, looking at me like it was a classic joke.

“Shit,” he said, “you gotta get a sense of humor. Fuck man, if you wanna roll with me, you gotta know what’s what.”

He spent the day following me around, talking, telling me stories.

Down Mass Ave to Union Station.

The high-arched ceiling, rows of octagons inside octagons, half-circle windows letting in the light. I see Carlos coming across the tiles, already laughing.

“Foxy! Fuck, man!”

We half-hug, shaking palms.

“Goddamn, Foxy—it’s been forever, man.”

His arms are thick, ham hocks—his shoulders straight. He looks like a boxer-professor.

“What you in town for?”

“Ah, some bullshit,” he says.

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We walk to cab, take it over to U Street.

“Say, Foxy,” he says, sitting in the cab, “how’d you manage that thing?”

This is an old joke of his.

“Oh, it was easy enough,” I say. “You just have to use two hands and close your left eye—jiggle it a little.”

He lets out a bellow, startling the driver.

## **21.4**

We used to sit out in the late afternoons, after walking around town,

looking in through the windows at the classrooms, the students sitting looking at the teachers teaching. I was fascinated by the orderliness of it all—the rows and columns, students all lifting their heads at the same moment, lowering them to write.

Carlos would be holding something, usually either an orange or apple or an empty soda bottle.

“Look at her,” he says, spitting into the old bottle.

“At who?”

“At her,” he says, pointing, “the one with the pony tail—with the blond hair and white shirt.”



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I recognize a girl from my  
homeroom.

“That’s Jenn Hughes,” I say.

Carlos is silent, staring.

“I know,” he says.

## 21.5

“Gray,” says a voice behind me.

I am walking down the hall, past rows of lockers. I turn to see Mr. Lopez, the wrestling coach, walking toward me. Blue sneakers and gray sweats. I wonder how he knows my name.

“Listen, Gray, I need to have a word with you.”

He moves close, folding his arms across his sweatshirt.

“What about, sir?”

“About your friend—my boy, Carlos. Carlos is one of our star wrestlers, and I don’t want you messing up his head, alright?”

I stare at him.

“Listen, Gray—I know about you, alright? Don’t worry about how, I just know. It’s my job to know, to keep an eye on my boys. I don’t want no distractions for my

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boys. They got enough worry keeping their weight down.”

I’m trying to think of something to say, but I keep hearing those words, *messing up his head* in my own. *What does that mean?*

He talks for a while longer, then sticks out his hand. I hold out my own, and he grips and shakes it.

“Good man,” he says, turning and walking back down the hall.

I took him to an Italian place, and soon he was eating two plates of spaghetti, wrapping the strands around his fork and swallowing them whole. I sat there staring, watching him eat.

“Yeah,” he said, seeing my looking, “after Iraq, I really got into weightlifting. Fuck that scrawny shit. I’m still a jackal, but now I’m a motherfucking badass jackal.”

He laughed, eating another clump of noodles.

He glanced at the waiter standing at the next table, then back at me.

“What about you? What you up to?”

“A cog in the machine,” I say.

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He grins. “Fuck no, not you, Foxy. I know you. You say that shit, but the whole time, you’re just fuckin’ with ‘em. Letting ‘em think they’ve got you. Am I right?”

I shrug, and he chuckles again.

“Same old Foxy,” he said. “Always poker-faced.”

## 21.7

We talk about old times—Mrs. Williamson, Biology Lab, the Vice Principal.

“He always was a fucking prick,” says Carlos. “Always riding my ass.”

I nod—then remember.

“That reminds me,” I say.

“Remember your wrestling coach?”

“Fuck, yeah—Coach Lopez! Man, he was a hardass. But good, good.”

We are sitting in a bar now, drinking. Carlos is slamming down his mug, then drinking it, then slamming it down again. He’s pulled out his glasses, putting them on, and I see the old Jackal looking at me, beneath that mound of muscle.

“Coach Lopez,” he says, “was the one who talked me into joining the marines.”

“One time,” I said, “I was walking down the hall, and he pulls me aside—and

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he says, ‘Gray, I don’t want you messing up Carlos’s mind, so stay away from him.’”

“He said what?”

“I don’t want you messing up Carlos’s mind,’ he said.”

Carlos chugs, then slams the mug, looking at wetspots on the bar.

“No shit?”

“No shit,” I say.

“Yeah, well—he thought you were a subversive or something...” he begins, then fades out, looking at the bar.

I remember being surprised the first time I met Carlos' mom. She looked more like a grandmother to me, more than twice my own mother's age—curly gray hair, wrinkles, short. Even the way she dressed was from another era—old thick-soled shoes, a long navy blue skirt, a denim jacket over a floral-print blouse.

“*Adentro*,” she said, holding open the metal screen door, smiling, waving us inside.

Carlos showed me the couch, then went off to talk to his mother in Spanish. As they stood in the kitchen, I looked over the room: a few pictures, framed in wood, gold; a



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large mirror; a wooden table, on top of which were a few carved figurines; a large oriental rug; a basket; a television.

“She’s making lunch,” said Carlos, bouncing down on the cushion.

We watched television—a game show. Sitting there, waiting for lunch, I felt like a young child.

There was always some point when we were together, every time, each time, when Carlos would annoy me.

“Look at that old woman,” he said to me, sitting on the couch.

I knew he was making a joke, that maybe he was embarrassed by his mother's age, but the way he said it irritated me.

"She's a fucking old bag," he said, looking at me. "Can't even speak English for shit."

"So what?"

"So what? So, we're in fucking the United States of America, that's what. Learn to speak like an American! Fucking bullshit."

I looked at him, trying to figure out the meaning, the motivation behind his words. *Did he really mean what he was saying? Or was he saying it because he*

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*thought I wanted to hear it?* Before I could respond, though, his mother came out, bringing out a bowl of beans, a plate of meat, tortillas, lettuce, tomatoes.

“*Gracias*,” I said, and she smiled.

Eating, I looked over at Carlos to see him frowning, unmoved, his eyes glued to the television screen.

## 21.9

The rest of the evening into night he was full-throttle old-Jackal all the way, cursing and moaning at the moon.

“Goddamn, goddamn,” he said,  
putting his arm around my shoulder.

We were walking along Florida,  
headed to his hotel.

“Hey, Foxy,” he said, looking at me  
sideways.

I kept walking. I couldn’t tell if I  
was sober or not.

“Hey, Foxy,” he said.

“Yep.”

“Foxy—why didn’t you ever call me  
Jackal?”

I kept walking, seeing the hotel in  
sight. I felt my annoyance coming on, and I  
wanted to remember the visit on good terms.

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“Dunno,” I said. “I thought I did. Least, I do in my head.”

“The Fox and the Jackal’—that’s what they called us, right? ‘Cept you never did.”

I stayed silent, coming to the entrance.

“You know the way up?” I asked, stopping outside the doors.

“Huh?”

He turned around, looking.

“Oh,” he said, then turned back to me.

“Hey, Foxy,” he said, suddenly serious.

“Yep.”

“You’re my friend, right? We’re friends, right?”

His face was heavy, downcast, maudlin.

“Sure,” I said, opening the door.

“The Fox and the Jackal,” I said, ushering him in.

His face lit up, and he began striding to the elevator on his own.

“Fuck yeah! The Fox and the Jackal! Fuckin right!”

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We walked past the concierge grinning, shaking his head.

At the elevator doors, I leaned and pressed the button.

Carlos stood and grabbed my shoulder.

“Goddamn, Foxy,” he said. “You always were an—an inscrutable motherfucker. You know that?”

Then the elevator opened and he went inside; I turned and left before seeing the doors close.

## **22.1**

Bold blustery Monday morning.

Wind blows me down into the metro, gusts me up into the bus, out again onto the sidewalk. I'm pushed across into the coffee shop, coming out to sit in the park.



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Newspapers and bags hovering about, attaching to trees, trashcans, the ankles and calves of passersby. At eight forty-five, I see her standing with her lovely eyes, and I fall in and out of love again, watching as she turns to look at me, then turns back to step up onto the bus.

Walking to work, I'm lifted off the sidewalk, floating—dropped down into my office, behind a stack of papers and folders and books, computer monitor and filing cabinet, through which I can see Rong gazing contemplatively out the window.

“Rong?” I ask.

Slowly, as if watching a train go by, she rotates her chair, looking at me.

“You ok?” I ask.

She stares at me as if I am speaking another language—then awakes from her daze, says, “No—yes, I’m ok. I just like watching the wind.”

“Ok,” I say, and lower my head.

## **22.2**

Nearing lunch, Rong walks over to my desk, looking at me. I’m seeing something on her face, but I can’t quite pin it down.

“Let’s go to lunch,” she says.

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“Alright,” I say.

We stop by a food cart—bulgogi—  
carrying our meals to a nearby square.

Sitting on concrete, our backs to the wind.

Rong is stabbing meat, saying, “I had  
a miscarriage.”

A gust comes from behind, flapping  
the lid of her Styrofoam square. I suddenly  
realize that I haven’t seen Rong use the  
phone once all morning.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

She is shoving food into her mouth,  
fast, finishing her own lunch and leaning  
over, stabbing chunks of meat from my own,

biting and chewing all at once, swallowing in quick repetitive gulps. I open her water and hand it to her, and she takes it and drinks it all in one quick quaff—her head back, the wind blowing her hair; and when she finishes, she fast lowers her head and looks around, tossing the bottle five feet straight into a trash can, a bullet through the wind. When she looks back at me, a glance, I see that her eyes are wet.

I put my arm around her shoulder, saying, “I’m sorry, Sarah,” and she stiffens—then succumbs, leaning against me, crying.

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I convince Rong to go home. In my empty office, I look out the window, watching the leaves blown on branches. A pigeon sits, leaning against the ledge.

I think back to our various brushes with abortion law, and I look back through the long history of defining the terms—“abortion,” “viable,” “premature,” “death,” “murder,” “voluntary expulsion,” “fetus,” “embryo.” Curiosity piqued, I begin further researching, looking into the meaning of the term “miscarriage.”

Again, I have the terms *fetus*, *embryo*, *premature*, and *viable*. Soon, I have

*stillborn, clinical spontaneous abortion, septic abortion, and habitual abortion.*

Medical, religious, legal. *I didn't even know Rong was pregnant. Should I have known?* I think back to the look on Bob's face at the baseball game. At that point, he knew about his baby. He was a soon-to-be father.

*"miscarriage"—spontaneous abortion.*

*There are two keywords here: 1) "spontaneous", and 2) the implied word—the what. Spontaneous abortion of what?*

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*A stillbirth is a miscarriage that is delivered.*

*Within the medical terminology, there are several types of miscarriage, here in plain language: 1) delayed, 2) complete, 3) incomplete, 4) missed, and 5) inevitable.*

*The easiest way, however, to categorize miscarriage is to begin by developing a timeline for birth:*

*CONCEPTION-----*

*-----BIRTH*

*On this spectrum lie all the following: embryo, fetus, abortion, miscarriage, stillborn. There is also the timeline for life:*

*NOT VIABLE-----*

*VIABLE*

*The term “viable” has been hotly debated, and is still under consideration today. While “viable” once meant “able to live on its own,” that meaning has been discarded and replaced with: “able to live.” Any fetus that is able to live, with or without medical intervention, is now considered “viable.” This, then, begs*



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*the question: at what point can a fetus survive outside the womb? Could an embryo one day, potentially, with medical intervention, survive and grow outside the womb? In other words, if scientists can grow X in a laboratory, can they someday likewise grow a human using a “medical surrogate”? (How much would such a medical surrogate cost? Who would pay?)*

*For all practical considerations, “someday” is not now. Currently, an embryo cannot*

*be grown outside the womb; ergo, an embryo is not viable.*

*The question then becomes whether or not all miscarriages are “not viable.” That is to ask: do some “spontaneous abortions,” occur with viable fetuses? Or does the fact that they miscarry automatically deem them “not viable”?*

*To summarize the above: until recently, a miscarriage was considered the spontaneous death of a non-viable fetus or embryo. Is this a redundant phrase?*

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*From here, the next question is: what caused the death? Or: what does “spontaneous” mean?*

*“Spontaneous” here means “unintentional” or “not intentionally caused by humans.” Because, of course, spontaneous, in the medical context, is quite a meaningless term. Nothing that dies dies spontaneously—there is always a medical explanation, or cause. In this way, we can think of “spontaneous” as synonymous with “natural causes.” A miscarriage is an*

*abortion arising from natural causes.*

*What, then, is “unnatural”? What is outside of nature? Are humans a part of nature? What are those causes?*

...

I work on the definition for hours, late into the evening, eventually researching even things like *sudden infant death syndrome*. I think about Rong, and how she always follows the legal definition of terms, the legal way of seeing things. How can you look at a miscarriage from a legal standpoint? A miscarried child, or fetus, receives no legal name, no legal birth certificate, no legal certificate of death. Legally, it never existed.

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## 23.1

Bright breezy day, windows open on morning. Waking to watch the news: a drive-by on Minnesota Avenue, four teens shot dead. Police already have the shooters

in custody, two young men—a gang dispute. Watching the replay of the scene, the police walking around the tape, between victims, cruisers, sirens flashing, I recognize a face—Marcus, loading a bodybag into the back of an ambulance.

## 23.2

Wednesday night: Marcus has to remind me of the rules. The winner gets two dollars, four if he's dealt a 49 or 50. We played four-handed: Marcus, Gregg, Mike, and me.

“So what do you do?” asks Gregg, tossing out a 9 of clubs.

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“I work for the Federal Government,” I say, asking, “How about you?”

I take the 9 and lay down three 9s.

“Programming,” says Gregg.

“Automotive repair,” says Mike, smiling, taking a card. “Also known as a mechanic.”

“I’m an EMT,” says Marcus, taking a card.

Gregg picks up the 4 of diamonds and lays down 4, 5, 6.

“I saw you on the news,” I say,  
looking at Marcus, then down at my hand.  
“That shooting.”

I pick up a card—the king of clubs.  
Mike picks up a card.

“Yeah,” says Marcus, picking up a  
card—then knocking.

We add up our hands—Marcus wins,  
taking the money.

“Dammit,” says Gregg.

### 23.3

“That was bullshit,” says Mike,  
discarding a queen.

“What?” asks Gregg.



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“That drive-by. They were kids.”

Marcus takes a card. He glances up at me, then back at his hand.

“How’s my father doing?” he asks.

“Good,” I say.

Gregg picks up the queen.

“How many was it?” he asks Marcus.

Marcus shrugs, stands. “You all want a drink?”

“Well, it’s about time,” says Mike.

“I was wondering...” says Gregg.

I nod.

Marcus heads to the kitchen; then comes back with four beers open, holding the necks together. We each take one.

“It was four kids,” says Marcus, sitting.

“Ah, shit,” says Gregg.

“That’s what I thought,” says Mike.

“Whose turn is it?” asks Marcus.

“Ah,” I say, drinking, leaning forward, “it’s mine.”

I take a card—2 of spades. I try to remember if 2s are wild.

## 23.4

Gregg wins.

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I stand and get the next round of drinks. When I return, Mike is dealing.

“His limp is getting worse,” I say.

“Who?” asks Mike.

“His father,” I say, nodding at Marcus.

I sit and drink; then look at my hand.

“Frostbite,” says Marcus, picking up a card—then laying down three 3s.

“Damn,” says Gregg, “already?”

He picks up a card.

I pick of a card—the jack of clubs.

Mike picks up a card.

“What frostbite?” he asks.

Marcus picks up a card.

“My father,” says Marcus. “It’s from Korea—the war. He got frozen up there.”

“How?” asks Gregg, taking a card—laying down the 9, 10, J of diamonds.

Marcus drinks.

“That’s all I know,” he says. “He won’t talk about it—less he gets drinking.”

I take a card—6 of hearts.

“See,” says Marcus, looking at me, “you see him now, like he is now. Like a lamb. But that’s new—that’s the illness, where his memory gets all fucked up. But

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before—that man was a goddamn jaguar, no fun to be around.”

## 23.5

I win a hand.

Gregg goes to get the drinks.

“I remember once,” says Mike, leaning back, drinking, digging at his crotch, “you and me decided we wanted to go over to Baltimore and see some strippers.”

“Aw, shit,” says Marcus, leaning into his hands. “That was you—not me.”

“You went, didn’t you?”

Marcus just shaking his head,  
grinning.

Gregg laughs, bringing in the beer.

“Somehow, your old man found  
out—”

“You were kicked out,” says Marcus.  
“Don’t let me see that boy around here,” he  
said. “That boy is trash.”

Mike is laughing, looking at Marcus.

“You know,” he says, “But I always  
thought it was really ‘cause I was too dark—  
that’s what it was.”

Marcus shook his head,  
emphatically—then drank.

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“No, not him—he wasn’t like that. My granny, she was—she was one of those old type, living in LeDroit. Dunbar. Howard. *High class, high-yellow*, Mom would call her behind her back, and Dad would laugh, ‘cause Mom always made him laugh, and ‘cause he knew it was true. We all knew it was true. Granny was a snob. ‘Cept she wasn’t yellow, she was more like white.”

I see Mike glance at me—then look away.

“But not my pops,” says Marcus.  
“He was proud of going down to New

Orleans, of being in Hattiesburg, getting out the vote.

“No,” he says, looking at Mike, “he thought you were alright. He knew you were a dog, but that was alright. He was just a hard man who liked to get good and mad, that’s all. He would yell at me about something least once a week—if it wasn’t for Mom back then, I’d be nearly...

“But he’s different now. He’s mellow yellow. I don’t even nearly recognize him, to be honest. I see him limping with that cane, looking around, smiling at me, asking me to play chess. It’s like a different person.”



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He drank—then went to say  
something more, then drank again, thinking.  
We all drank.  
We played a hand.

## 23.6

By the end of the night, I'd lost some twenty dollars and was feeling sunk. Marcus walked me out; we shook hands. I kept thinking about the kids dead from the shooting, Marcus loading the bodies into bags, into an ambulance—all while their mothers, fathers, stood in the street, crying, surround by cops, the crowd, cameras. Over

and over in my mind, I tried to think of a way to broach the subject, to talk about it, but nothing would come. There was no way to talk about it. So, I just thanked him and walked through the door, out walking and looking for a cab—ending up taking a bus to the metro, the metro to home.

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## 24.1

All through my early teens, onto into my mid-twenties, I had a recurring dream. I would have it at least twice a year, sometimes as often as once or twice a week.

There is a group of us. We are in a snowy landscape, walking on the side of a mountain ridge, a snow-covered valley below. It is lightly snowing. Walking in front is a man with the face of a snow-lion, holding a spear; next, is a human; and behind is a woman with the face of a snow-tiger. All three of these figures, together, are me. We are walking slow, trudging through heavy snow. The human is wearing an animal pelt, its hood edged with lion hair. Up ahead is a mountain peak—we look and see the snow lessening. Behind the blanket of snow, in front of us, the sun is a round pulsing orb.

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## 24.2

As we are walking, the lion-faced man turns and points to his right, down into the valley below, behind us. We all three look—there: a line of people, walking in the snow, all wearing black. We sense, instinctively, that these people are chasing us. Yet they are not moving with any haste; they come, instead, with a slow, methodical pace. We stand there for a moment longer, watching them.

The person in front of the group down below stops, lifting up its head—showing us the face of a falcon. It stands,

watching us—then spreads its arms, flapping, flying. It is coming towards us. We stand for a moment longer—then turn forward and begin walking faster, faster, faster. Tiger-face looks back and sees now two falcon-humans closing in.

## 24.3

The dream was not always the same. Sometimes it was longer, sometimes shorter. Sometimes, the tiger-faced woman was in front, while the lion-faced man was in back. Sometimes the people down below were wearing white, blending into the landscape. Sometimes their faces were not those of

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falcons, but of owls or, sometimes, eagles. But there was always a moment when we stopped, looked down, and saw them. And there was always a moment when the person in front stopped, looked up, and saw us. And there was always the final moment when that person spread its wings and began flying toward us, and we turned and began walking faster, faster up the mountain, toward the sun, the person flying close behind us, closing in—all of them closing in.

## 25.1

It was late, the witching hour. I was walking to the bathroom, still drowsy, yet awake enough to wonder why I was awake. Down the hall, I saw the light on—and, listening, I heard my mother's voice. Sliding



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on my socks, so as not to creak the floorboards, I made my way to the end of the hall.

“No,” she was saying, “I’m going to hang up.”

Then waiting. She was standing next to the phone table, next to the window, her back to me as she looked out into the night, her face half in shadow, half in light.

“No—don’t do that, I’ll—I’m going to change my number, so don’t bother calling again.”

And she thrust the receiver away from her ear—then gently dropped it into

place. Her left hand came up, resting under her chin as she looked down at the floorboards, turning slightly away from the panes. Before I could move, she looked up and turned and saw my head, my face peeking around the corner.

“What’s wrong, Little Fox?” she asked. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said.

“Alright, then,” she said, coming to me, turning me around, walking me down the hallway.

We went into the bathroom together, and she waited while I went, then helped me

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up to wash my hands. All the while, I meant to ask her who was on the phone, but the look on her face just never was right—it was never the right moment. The next day, too, I meant to ask, but the right moment never came.

## 25.2

I began joining Mally more regularly on his bi-and, sometimes,-tri-weekly lunches. Half the time I met new faces, the other half I was told of the names behind ones I already knew.

“This is Ms. Peterson,” said Mally,  
“with the auto workers.”

“This is Mr. Holloway; he is very  
much interested in the education of  
America’s youth.”

“This is Mr. Golan, a friend of the  
computer industry.”

“Ms. Winslow is concerned with  
insurance.”

“Ms. Phelps is worried about the  
state of the pharmaceutical industry.”

“Mr. Feeny often enjoys a cigarette.”

“Ms. Yarly is always talking on the  
phone.”

And so on.

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If I met a union lobbyist, then we would discuss the meaning of terms like “free assembly,” “trade,” “group,” and the like. An auto lobbyist would want to define “green automobiles”. An education lobbyist would want to define “learning,” and “assessment.”

If I met an insurance lobbyist, then, somewhere in the conversation, we would talk about the definition of “life” or “risk” or “liability.” Actually, it seemed that most every group wanted to have their own definition of “life”: doctors, insurance companies, prison lobbyists, lawyers groups,

associations of the elderly, pro-life, pro-choice, animal rights activists...

Mally would sit back and watch the show, eating, listening to them talk, drawing me out to offer a few noncommittal responses.

“Why do you do that?” I asked him once.

“Because,” he said, smiling, “I enjoy seeing people squirm —especially you, Fox. You need to squirm a little, in order to understand the world a bit better. Otherwise, you see the world too pure—too detached, a beautiful soul. You need to get a little mud in your eye.”

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## 25.3

Now and again we would receive phone calls that would hang up. They always made my mom nervous (though she tried to keep that tension hidden from me). They didn't happen very often—maybe once every year or so, twice at most.

“Who is this?” I remember yelling once, determined not to simply hang up. Then, my anger getting the better of me: “*Who the fuck are you, motherfucker!*”

Which made my mom come downstairs; which made me hang up.

Another time, I just sat there, waiting the silence out. *You hang up first*, I thought. But they didn't. Five, ten, twenty, thirty minutes we sat there, listening to each other's silence. Mom was out somewhere—renting a movie, I think. Or maybe she was on a date. After the thirty-minute mark, I heard breathing, and I recognized immediately that it was a man. Still, I resisted giving in and speaking, or even breathing myself. I sat and waited. We sat there like that for at nearly two hours, until she came home and I hung up.



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## 25.4

Eating with him regularly, I began to see that Mally was quite studied about his maladies.

“I have a backache,” he would say to a lobbyist for the elderly.

“My tooth kept me up all night,” to a banker.

“I have horrible asthma today,” to a tobacco lobbyist.

“Confidentially, of course,” wearing sunglasses, leaning in to a prohibitionist, “I had a little too much gin last night.”

“Look, Syd,” I remember a nuclear lobbyist once saying, gravitas weighing down her voice, “I need to know where I stand. Are you with us?”

Mally, equally ponderous, slowly sipped his whisky—his eyes drifting, heavy, as if he were debating the fate of life itself.

“I’m always with you, Meg,” he said, and even I—for a moment, at least—believed him.

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“Did you mean it?” I asked him later, on the way back to the office.

“I always mean everything,” he said, perfunctorily, looking down the street for a cab.

## 25.5

In early summer, Mally came in with the flu. He was genuinely sick, even transmitting it to half the people in the building—myself included. The odd thing was that that week, though I could tell that he was exhausted (and the following week, getting the flu myself, I was to experience

that enervation first hand), his head heavy, his eyes drained, he acted less ill than per usual; he was, indeed, almost the model of perfect health, even though we who knew him all recognized and could see how ill he really was.

## 25.6

But, of course, she knew who it was all along. Myself, it wasn't until I was a teenager that I began to sort things out, to realize that it was my father calling. I don't even remember how I figured it out—it just came to me one day, after listening to the silence on the other side of the line. *Who*

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*else could be so persistent?* I asked myself.  
*A male voice? A person who scares Mom?*  
As soon as it came to me, I felt stupid for not  
seeing to it sooner.

This knowledge, though, didn't  
change things much. It was not as if I were  
to say: "*Dad—is it you? Can we be  
reunited?*" feeling suddenly some soulful  
connection. I felt nothing—save some slow-  
building curiosity. When the voice breathed,  
I breathed in response. When the call was  
silent, I covered the mouthpiece.

The last string of calls—seventeen in five days—was what prompted her final move to the island. It happened while I was away at college, finishing up my junior year.

“He called again,” she said, ringing me again after his fifth call.

I was in my dorm room, sitting on my bed, reading a book about the *red queen theory*—how sexual selection shapes fitness (sex drives species ahead in order to stay relatively in place; a theory, no doubt, comparable to the *bureaucracy treadmill*).

Dustin was on his bed playing a war video game, wherein he was a sniper shooting terrorists. Sometimes, on the

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weekends, he could convince me to play along, so I knew all the rules and tricks for playing. When I looked up to talk on the phone, I watched him for a while.

By this point, we—Mom and I—had brought it all out into the open, discussing and interpreting the calls together—though she always had the final say.

“I’m moving. Somewhere far away this time. Away from relatives. Away from everyone.”

She’d been saying this for years, but I could hear now that the final straw was falling, alighting to fasten her resolve.

“Where would you go?”

“I dunno. Up north—closer to where you are.”

“But I’ll probably move after I graduate. I’m hoping to go to law school in Washington.”

“I know—I know. But he wouldn’t ever go up north. He hates the cold.”

*What difference does that really make?* I thought—but said nothing.

## 25.8

What I gleaned, gradually, was that, in his own mind, Mally was mentoring me. The lunches were lessons—sometimes



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performances. After each meal, on our postprandial walk or ride or stroll back across the Mall, he would always pause or lean to impart some little piece of wisdom, an insight into his inner workings, or the ways of the lobbying world, or life advice for me to heed.

“You always hear,” he said once, almost as if he were giving a summation, “that *lobbyist* is a bad word. You can’t hear someone say *lobbyist* without a hint of disgust in the voice, as if the word tasted like charcoal. It’s fashionable and trite to hate lobbyists—and it’s for the simple minded.”

His finger was almost wagging now, and he bent forward as he walked along the boulevard, expounding because, finally, he had someone to expound to.

“You’re the definition man, Gray,” he said, “but I’m going to tell you a definition for once. *Lobbyist* is just another word for *citizen*. It’s a citizen’s duty to participate in democracy—and that’s exactly what lobbyists do—they participate! When you believe in something, what should you do? You speak up! You write letters, you protest—and, if you’re smart, *you lobby*. People against lobbyists are people against a vocal citizenry.”

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He walked a little more, silent—though I knew that the silence was only for dramatic effect.

“The truth is,” he said, continuing, “that people only hate those lobbyists whose causes they disagree with. If your job is a dairy farmer, then you won’t hate the milk lobby. If you’re a locavore, you only hate the agribusiness’s lobbying because they have more money than you. If locavores had more money—and they might some day!—then they would love lobbyists.

“Lobbying is just a means to an end, Fox,” he said, crossing Independence Avenue, “it is neither good nor bad.”

“Like a gun,” I said, half-joking, looking down as I walked.

“Yes! Just like a gun!” he was talking faster now, approaching the building.

“People have the right to use guns—but most of them don’t. Some people buy guns for a hobby, or—or just to have and sit in their homes. Others—they use guns to get what they want—to steal, threaten, kill, murder. Then you have—you have criminals using—you have small revolvers and submachine guns—different kinds of guns

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with different kinds of power. Groups of people getting together to use guns. And you have the military—you have the military itself—but. But, my point is—is that free speech is the same thing.

“Most people don’t choose to use their right to free speech. Or maybe it just sits in their closet, making them feel good, making them feel safe. Or maybe they use it once every four years, to vote. So those other people that do use it—they have an advantage. And some of them decide to band together, to form groups, so that their voices are louder. Some of them join

political parties, because they realize that that is the most effective way to be heard. And some of them lobby. And some of those people—some of them use money to make their voices even louder—that's all free speech. You get me?"

Here, we came into the building, the elevator.

"You get me, Gray?"

But I could see that he wasn't listening for a response. He was off, drifting, absorbing the grandiloquence of his words, his wonderful hortatory oratory. Seeing Mally there, in the elevator, looking wistfully at the ceiling, I pictured him soon back in his

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office, opening a word processing program, writing his thoughts out—his rules, maxims. *This is for posterity*, he would be thinking, including me within that group —and, envisioning the scene, I began to get a better grasp of how Mally saw me, the kind of person he thought I was.

## 25.9

He only ever called me—directly—once. I was in my dorm room, alone. Dustin had gone out for the night, drinking, and it was still early. I planned on having the night, the room to myself. I first walked

across campus, passing groups of two and three, all smiles, and went to the sandwich shop—ordering a sub, a soda, chips. There was a long line. The girl there, behind the counter, was working alone, and I felt bad for her—she looked downtrodden, sweat matting her hair to her brow. Walking back to my room, I thought about her, worrying.

In my room, I sat on my bed, eating; then, bored, I began playing Dustin's video game—shooting enemy soldiers in the desert. Outside, students walked by in larger groups, louder now—talking, laughing, giggling, howling at the moon.



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The volume of the game was up, so at first I didn't hear the ringing amidst the sounds of warfare—guns, screaming, bombs.

“Hello?”

Silence.

“Hello?”

I turned off the screen.

“Hello?”

I leaned back against the wall.

“Hello, hello, hello, hello, hello,” I said.

“Dude, shut the fuck up!” came from below my window.

I stood and looked out: sinewy strapping lads, wearing shirts with sleeves too-tight, slapping sandals and each other on backs.

“You shut the fuck up!” said another—inciting another round of back-slapping, arms around shoulders.

“Hello,” I said again.

I hung up—star 69.

A metallic voice: “*Sorry, this number is non-traceable.*”

I watched the groups continuing to pass under the window. I thought about calling my mother. I went back to eating.

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A quarter-hour later, the phone rang again.

“Hello?”

Silence.

“I’m eating dinner, so I’m putting you on speaker phone.”

I switched on the speaker, laying the phone on the blanket.

I went back to eating and playing the game.

When I was finished eating, I picked up the phone, first switching off the speaker.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

No one answered.

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## 26.1

Light summer sun, mid-June.

Crossing Columbia, heading down 18<sup>th</sup>  
Street—down Florida, down 17<sup>th</sup>. The  
narrow sidewalks sit in shade, tree roots

bulging brick sidewalks. Across the street,  
sunlight hits the window panes.

Ximena is sitting outside the  
restaurant, waiting, drinking a beer.

“I ordered for you,” she says, without  
looking up.

“Ordered what?” I ask, sitting.

“Tamales,” she says—looking up,  
leaning onto her hands, smiling.

I nod.

“What are we doing today?” I ask as  
the plates come. “You said you had a plan?”

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“Today,” she says, nodding at the waiter, pulling out her napkin, “we’re looking at apartments.”

“Apartments—why?”

“Because,” now taking her first bite, savoring, swallowing, “oh— *that’s good*—because, I’m moving here.”

“Moving to DC?”

Eating, drinking, she nods.

I look down at my food.

## 26.2

“What’re you doing today?” I ask Rong, coming over to her desk.

It is a Tuesday morning, early.  
She looks up from her phone.  
“Codifying the Alzheimer’s Act,” she  
says.

“You have time to go out?”  
She thinks—nods.  
We walk down and out the building.  
“Where’re we going?” she asks.  
“You’ll see,” I say.  
We walk up 3<sup>rd</sup> Street—  
Independence—back behind the Capitol.  
“Ah” she says, seeing my intentions.  
Ahead—the Supreme Court  
Building. We enter through the side,  
showing our passes.



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## 26.3

We look first at a 1-bedroom in Columbia Heights, just off 13<sup>th</sup> and Monroe Streets. The place is big, larger than I expected—bright windows, letting in light.

“What d’you think?” asks Ximena, turning away from the window, hands in her pockets.

I walk past her to the window, looking down below.

The sun is beating down the pavement.

“I think,” I say, “Monroe doesn’t have the best reputation.”

“Reputation—like what?”

I shrug, turning to her. “I dunno, really, since I don’t live here. I just always see Girard and Monroe in the news.”

“It’s a good price.”

“Maybe that’s *why* it’s a good price.”

She’s looking at me sideways, her fingers in her front jean-pockets. She winks.

## 26.4

At home, I think about Ximena, about how she sees me—us. I think of the word—*relationship*. All animals have

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relationships—so, too, plants, bacteria.

What is a “relationship”? When does it begin—when does it end? Two beings communicating—that is a relationship. The longer the communication takes place, the more in-depth the relationship:

(Communication) x (time) = depth of relationship.

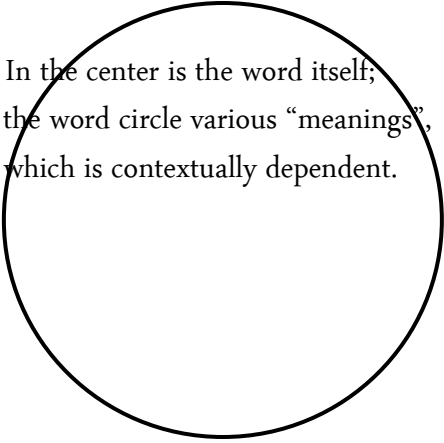
But the simple fact that two beings communicate for an extended period of time does not necessitate that those two beings are in a *friendly* relationship—it does not even

mean that they necessarily like or respect each other. An employee and an employer may communicate on a daily basis for some fifty years—and yet deeply dislike each other. It is more likely, though, that their feelings toward one another will fluctuate over time.

The meaning of a particular word is best conceived of not as a fixed point, rather as a spectrum surrounding that point:

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## MEANING



In the center is the word itself;  
around the word circle various “meanings”,  
each of which is contextually dependent.

The meaning of “relationship” thus  
looks somewhat like:

Dialogue      Physical/mental

Miscommunication

Communication

Exchange

Friendship

Intercourse

Love

Long-term

Parent/child Family

Short-term      Acquaintance      Boss/employee

Group

Symbolic

Talking

Gesturing

Yelling Teacher/student

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## Representative/constituents Enemy

### Correspondence

A single interaction between two people may float around, moving from friendship to correspondence to yelling to love—each and all subsumed under *relationship*. Around each word, such a grouping exists. We could develop, for instance, a similar grouping around *love*; that circle would overlap with the circle above. *Love*, at one moment means *lust*, at another

means *friendship*, at another even *hate*. So that, in the end, we can see many overlappings between various meanings, words, and concepts.

## 26.5

SCOTUS is hearing arguments for a 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment case—whether or not a citizen can challenge Federal law as beyond enumerated powers. A man refused to pay child support, because he did not believe the child was his own. The man lived in the town of Bella Vista, Arkansas, which happens to be on the border between Arkansas and Missouri. The woman and child moved



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three miles up the road, to an area officially designated as Caverna, Missouri. Federal agents arrested the man at his work (a Walmart, located on the border between the two states) for violating Federal law. The man, Tackett (the case is *Tackett v. US*) was convicted and sent to prison. During his trial, it was proven (via DNA test) that he was, in fact, the child's father. Tackett argued that the Federal law violated the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment; that is, that the Federal Government had no right to insert itself into a local criminal matter (both Arkansas and Missouri, like all states, have their own child

support laws)—that child support could not be regulated by the Federal government. Federal prosecution made Tackett's punishment much more severe.

We listen to the arguments—  
citations, mostly, of previous cases.

“The final fact of the matter is, your honors,” said the petitioner in summation, “that this case has nothing to do with commerce.”

“But child support is money, is it not?” asked the Chief Justice.

“Yes, but the economic impact must be direct—it cannot be indirect.”

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“And the influence of child support payments is not direct?” asked the third Justice.

“Our argument, your honors—in short—is that it is not. Child support payments only indirectly influence commerce.”

## 26.6

Afterwards, I asked Rong what she thought.

“PHW,” she said. “666—the Bradley Amendment.”

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, “he’ll have to pay back-payments of child support. But this case is old anyway—I’m sure the kid is grown by now.”

Rong nodded.

We were walking the long route, down Constitution, heading toward lunch.

“But what do you think of the outcome?”

Already, she was on her phone, looking through old cases.

We came into a flatbread-sandwich shop, ordering—tuna, chicken.

“It seems silly to me,” she said, “to say that child support payments don’t have

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an economic impact. I know—it's not the same as growing wheat or marijuana, but that money still goes somewhere. At some point, legally, we have to find a way to recognize that money affects relationships, at least from an economic point of view."

I thought about it, then said, "It doesn't sound very—nice."

Rong looked at me, my smile.

"No," she said.

They called our orders.

I was sitting at home, thinking about things.

I called Ximena.

“Why did you become a lobbyist?” I asked her.

“I’m not a lobbyist,” she said, as if waiting for the question —glad, finally, to get it off her chest. “I’m an activist.”

“Alright, then—what’s the difference?”

“A lobbyist is someone who does it for the money—someone like Zach. That’s not me. I’m an activist—I do it because I believe in it.”

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“But doesn’t it amount to the same thing?”

“Not to me. Anyway—can you—do you only judge things based upon what they amount to? The end result?”

I had to think about this.

“Words mean how they’re used,” I said. “Meaning is use. So, from that perspective, a lobbyist and an activist sound a mite alike. Even if they don’t mean the same thing, they’re certainly overlapping concepts. They’re often used in the same context.”

Now, she was thinking.

“How about—is—is a man having sex with a prostitute the same as a man—a husband financially supporting his wife, because he loves her? Or vice versa?”

“It amounts to the same thing. Sex for money.”

She laughed.

“Alright,” she said. “Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know if I do or not—just thinking out loud.”

We talked a bit more, changing the subject; then hung up.



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## 27.1

Wednesday: Mally announces, *pro forma*, that the latest legislation is related to prison reform. The word “reform” is quickly dispatched, replaced with “reorganization.” The tentative title for the bill is: *HR 3406: A*

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*Bill for the Reorganization of Federal and State Prison Systems.* The act would mean big money for the prison lobby, each individual state, and the federal government. We have some ten extra staffers just to work on the rough draft, and Senators and Congresspersons both send over a constant stream of staffers, secretaries, and administrative aides. Mally brings aboard various lobbyists, most of whom, by now, I know.

Very soon, key questions emerge; among them: *who will set the standard for*

*reorganization? What, exactly, is being reorganized, and why?*

Debate begins, both in Congress (a select subcommittee is formed) and in the media.

## **27.2**

There was a year, when I was twenty-one, into twenty-two, when I was intensely curious about my father; other than that, I've shown little interest. *If he didn't care about me, if he treated Mom like shit, why should I care about him?* That's always been my line of thinking—save that single year. During that period, I went around to everyone I

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know—grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, friends—asking what they knew and didn't know and thought they might know. Mom kept mum; she knew I was investigating, yet gave me a wide berth. All this was around the same time that she moved to the island and was just settling in—keeping herself occupied.

*Who am I? How do I define myself?*—questions we are all supposed to ask ourselves; questions which we all answer, either implicitly or explicitly. For a while, I thought that *who I was* was a determinant of

my DNA—my genes. My mind, I decided, was just an epiphenomenon, a side-effect of evolution. I had my identity all caught up in evolutionary mechanisms. So, I reasoned, if I could find my father, then I would have it all sorted out.

## 27.3

Mr. Knox calls, asking me to lunch.

New Jersey Avenue—crossing  
Constitution, Louisiana, D Street.

Entering the hotel, I see across the lobby Mr. Knox's back. He is wearing a crisp suit, talking to a woman and man. I cross, and he turns just as I reach him.

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“Mr. Gray!” he says, all smiles, using two hands to shake my one. “So good to see you.”

I nod.

Mr. Knox turns to the man and woman, opening himself, saying, “This is my friend, Mr. Gray. Mr. Gray, this is Ms. Stokes and Mr. Shepherd.”

We shake hands.

“A pleasure to meet you,” says Ms. Stokes.

“So nice to finally meet you,” says Mr. Shepherd.

Mr. Knox then ushers us across the lobby, into the lounge. An expansive expensive room, buzzing with conversations. A circle-shaped bar in the middle, side-bars along the walls.

We walk through rows of chatter to a table along the windows.

## **27.4**

“Ms. Stokes,” says Mr. Knox, “just flew into town.”

“From Dallas,” says Ms. Stokes.

“And Mr. Shepherd,” says Mr. Knox, “is from Kentucky.”

Mr. Shepherd smiles.



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The waiter comes, and we order; they order spritzers, and I order scotch.

“So,” I say, after sipping, “you both work in prisons?”

The three look at me—for a moment made uncomfortable.

Then Mr. Shepherd chuckles, says, “*Correctional facilities*, is the term, my friend.”

Ms. Stokes and Mr. Knox laugh.

“What is being corrected?” I ask, finishing the drink—waving for the waiter.

“Criminals,” says Mr. Shepherd, with growing interest.

The waiter comes, bringing my drink.

“Hold on,” says Mr. Shepherd, “I’ll have a Jim Beam.”

The waiter nods.

“Now—where were we?” I ask.

“Oh, right—what is it about the criminals that is being corrected? How are they being corrected? How do we know when they’re made to be correct?”

“That’s for the courts to decide,” says Ms. Stokes, now getting involved.

The waiter brings Mr. Shepherd’s drink.

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“There you go,” I say, and raise my drink.

Mr. Shepherd beams, lifting up his own.

We each sip.

“But what are they deciding? Hold on,” I say, holding up my hand as Mr. Shepherd starts to speak, “If we send a murderer to a *correctional facility*, what about that murderer is being corrected?”

“Well, it—it’s their mindset,” he says. “Their morality.”

“Which is it? Mindset or morality?”

“It’s both,” says Ms. Stokes.

I sip, thinking.

“*Mindset and morality*,” I say,  
looking at them.

Then I smile, saying, “Sounds like a  
psychological problem to me.”

“Absolutely not!” says Mr. Shepherd,  
fired up, palm on the table. “It is *not* a  
mental—it’s—”

“I’m not saying they’re mentally ill—  
just—well—alright, Mr. Shepherd, Ms.  
Stokes—let’s back up here. Do you—do you  
believe that mentally ill people exist?”

“Of course,” says Ms. Stokes, “but  
only in small numbers. The mentally ill are  
a very small percentage of the population.”

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“And criminals?” I ask. “What percentage are they?”

“I believe,” says Mr. Shepherd, leaning back, “that it’s roughly seven out of a thousand.”

“Seven and a half,” says Ms. Stokes.

“Seven and a half,” I say. “But—see, I didn’t specify *which* population. Seven-and-a-half for each country?”

“Each country is different, Mr. Gray,” says Ms. Stokes. “Each country—they all have different laws.”

“Different views of criminality,” says Mr. Shepherd.

“Different views of *what is to be corrected*,” I say, emphasizing the final words.

“But that’s because people are different!” says Mr. Shepherd—almost exasperated.

“And the mentally ill?” I ask—waving for the waiter.

Mr. Knox leans forward to interrupt.

“If it’s alright,” he says, “I’d like for us to move to a restaurant. I’m sure Mr. Shepherd and Ms. Stokes are both hungry from their flights.”

They both nod; I shrug—then toss back my drink.

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## 27.5

“Your father was a quiet man,” said my grandmother. “He liked to sit and watch other people. I remember one time, we had a party for your aunt and uncle’s engagement, some forty-fifty people or so— relatives, friends, children. The entire time, your father sat off to the side, drinking, watching the others talk and dance, laugh, sing. I tried to go over and talk to him for a while, but he wouldn’t really say much. He wasn’t rude, or anything like that. He was

more like—he would only give short answers.

“But it wasn’t only at get-togethers, or even when he was drinking—though he was a bad man when he had too much alcohol. No, he was always like that. Quiet, sitting off to the side. Your grandfather—at first, he liked that about your father. He liked him better than all the other boys that came along. Until—well—until he started hitting on your mother. Then, things changed.”

We were sitting next to the fireplace, Grandma in her old leather chair, a book



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open on the arm. An image flashed before my mind—the group of us children on the floor, listening to her tell her tales, ghost stories.

I waited her out.

She looked at me. “Has your mother ever talked to you about him?”

I shook my head.

“No,” she said, looking at the fire, “no—she wouldn’t. That’s how she is—always keeping things to herself. She never did tell me anything—ever. Not once in her entire life.”

She laughed a little to herself.

“One time,” she says, “she came home from school—oh, I don’t remember how old she was—little thing, with curls—your mother used to wear curls in those days—she wanted to take after my sister. She runs in, and I can see she’s hurt—something bad. So, I say, ‘Hold up there! What have you got going on down here?’ And I bend down to her, touching her knee. Whew! She gives me a look like I never seen!”

She laughs again—a little harder.

“She just ran away.

“An she’s been showing me that look ever since—her whole life.”

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“I think I know that look,” I said.

She nodded, looking at me, then back at the fire.

“Yes,” she said, “I’m sure you do—you have it yourself, at times.”

## 27.6

“What I’m curious about,” I say, “is the correcting process. You say, Ms. Stokes, that the courts decide who should be corrected—fair enough. But who decides *how* they are corrected? Who decides the actual *correctional process*?”

I am getting drunk, emphasizing more and more my words.

“The courts do, Mr. Gray,” says Ms. Stokes. “They determine how long, where—what type of facility—all of that. All of those things.”

“No—you’re not getting me. The courts—fine, they determine the amount of time, but other than that—it’s all *administrative*, right? *Bureaucracy*—the prisons—the institutions. *What food to serve, what to do all day long, what types of beds, blankets—all of those things.*”

Mr. Knox waves the waiter over; we order.

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“Look,” I say, drinking, “that’s why we’re here, right? *Code 2*, right?”

“Code 2?” asks Ms. Stokes.

“Sure,” I say, “The CFR—Code of Federal Regulations—*the bureaucrats’ Bible. Fucking Code 2.*”

They sit silent.

“I mean—I apologize,” I say, looking at Mr. Knox, “to be sure, steady old boy. But, I mean, why all this bullshit rig—rigmarole, nod-nod, wink-wink, right?”

I wave for another drink.

“You and Mally,” I say, looking again at Mr. Knox. “Two peas in a pod.”

For a moment, he looks  
nonplussed—then, aw-shucks, smiles.

“Thank you,” he says. “Who is  
Mally?”

“Or should I say pimps,” I say,  
ignoring the question, “*Two pimps in a pod.*  
And you,” I continue, looking at Ms. Stokes  
and Mr. Shepherd, “*you’re the Johns.*”

The waiter comes, bringing my  
drink; I drink.

“Which makes me,” I say, “the  
prostitute. No—the act itself—the sex.”

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“Your Mom’s like you, Fox—she doesn’t tell anyone anything. Except for Dad—your granddad.”

“Not even when you were growing up?”

“No—not really,” says my aunt.

“No—there were times, yes. But I was older than her by six years—so there was a gap. And we lived in different worlds. She lived with the beatniks—or whatever you called them for that generation—people like that. I was more of a—you know —the cheerleader type—the school council.”

“But I remember you and Uncle Brad talking with Mom—when I was a kid. And then, the next day, we moved—we came up to live near you.”

“You remember that?”

“You were sitting in the sunroom. I was peeking out from my room.”

“Yes—that time, she talked. Your mom likes to talk—she’s always liked to talk. But not about things that are close to her. Not with me, at least. I mean—she didn’t say much of anything. Just that she was scared again, getting phone calls, threats from him.”



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“He said things to her on the phone?  
What did he say?”

“Oh—she wouldn’t go into that. I mean, she said he would threaten her, but she didn’t—she wouldn’t tell us the exact words. Or maybe we just didn’t feel it was right to ask—considering how—how fragile she was. But maybe your grandfather would know.”

“What about when—when it all began?”

She sighs. “Well, that was a long time ago. Before you were born, even. But even that—most of it I don’t know. It’s just

from guessing, you see—and from learning how to read her. And a little I got from your grandmom, who got it from your granddad.”

“But—”

“But no—no, he was abusive, Fox. Physically abusive, yes—if that’s what you’re asking. I know it must be hard for you to hear.”

“No, I wasn’t really—I already knew.”

“Oh—ok, good—I mean—”

“No—I mean, I’m just trying to figure out what kind of person he was. If that was a part of his personality or—or if it was just—I dunno—an anomaly.”

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“An anomaly?”

“If—did he act like an abuser, I guess I’m asking.”

She was silent for a moment.

“He was just a normal—he acted normal, Fox. I mean—I didn’t even know until much later, after your grandmother. When they first—when your mom first ran away, I was mad at her—I’m ashamed to say. I was mad at her, and I wasn’t really there for her, because I thought she was being stupid. And it wasn’t until much later that I realized—or I was told, really—what had happened.”

As I went to say something, I heard her crying.

## 27.8

Mr. Knox was hailing, saying goodbye to Ms. Stokes and Mr. Shepherd.

The two were sharing a cab. Before stepping in, they waved each to me; I nodded. I was standing on the sidewalk with my hands half-in my blazer pockets, feeling the warm air of the summer night.

Mr. Knox was coming toward me, his face lit from the streetlights.

“A thunderstorm is coming,” I said to him.

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He made as to look at the sky.  
“I think you may be right,” he said.

## 27.9

When I look back on that period now, my retronymed *investigations*, I see clearly that it was all laid out—that they had each and all been waiting for me, expecting me to do what I was doing —expecting to hear the questions I asked, so that they gave me answers even to the ones I hadn’t thought of, the ones I perhaps didn’t care about. It wasn’t necessarily a concerted effort; it was, more likely, that they had been

telling these stories to themselves for so long, for so many years, that they had become well-crafted tales, folklore—closed to any variations or addendums. And they had even developed these stories with a specific future audience—me—in mind, knowing that one day I would come to them, seeking, searching, curious—*wanting to know*. So that, over the years, they had built into the stories an expectation of that wanting, that curiosity, developing prepared answers to my questions, prepared cul-de-sacs for my prying, prepared red herrings to deflect my persistence.

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## 28.1

It's hot.

I ride the bus to the metro, sweating.

“Report all suspicious activity,” says a  
voice over the speakers.

It's humid.



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I walk to a convenience store, buying  
coffee iced. I sit in the park, watching the  
crowds.

She comes and turns and smiles;  
then steps onto the bus.

I work.

I go home.

## **28.2**

I get tired of the conditioned air,  
false winds.

I go out for a walk.

Hot, humid.

Evening.

I sit off 18<sup>th</sup> and Columbia. I watch  
the crowds.

Business women, men. College kids.  
Dates. Government employees off work.

Lawyers, lobbyists, contractors.

A few homeless men sitting outside  
McDonald's.

I walk across and into McDonald's,  
buying a water bottled, a fish sandwich.

I look at the crowd inside the  
restaurant. I notice that every customer is  
black. *Why?* Behind the counter, the  
workers are black or Latino. I look outside,  
through the glass, the crowds walking on the  
sidewalks, crossing the streets—white, asian,

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white, black, white, Latino, Indian, white,  
Middle Eastern.

I slide into a booth and eat the fish  
sandwich, the fries.

I look around the restaurant. I look  
out through the window.

### **28.3**

I go back home.

Outside the building, Lyon is sitting  
on a bench. I sit beside him.

“Can’t sleep?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Me neither,” I say.

“Too hot,” I say.

He slowly lowers his head, nodding.  
He is sitting with a cane between his knees,  
his hands resting on the handle.

He reaches into his sportcoat pocket  
and pulls out a handkerchief; then wipes his  
brow, his cheeks; then replaces the  
handkerchief.

“Too humid,” I say.

He nods. Slowly.

## 28.4

“Do I know you?” he asks.

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“You were born,” I say, barely hesitating, “halfway between New Orleans and Hattiesburg.”

He smiles.

“That’s what I always say,” he says.

He looks at me.

“No—really, though, I was born in LeDroit. Up on the hill.”

“In DC.”

“In the District, yes.”

A woman clops past, looking down.

I feel the humidity seeping through my skin.

“I had—” he begins, then pauses—again reaching into his pocket, grabbing the handkerchief, wiping his brow, his cheeks.

“I had a strict father, and a loving mother. Loving, so long as I did right in my studies. So long as I kept good company.”

*“Good company.”*

He looks at me—pulling him out of the past.

Chuckling to himself, he puts the handkerchief back into his pocket.

“Yes,” he says, “my mother was a—well, she was a snob, really. She had a paper bag in her mind’s eye—ready to measure any of my friends. That’s what Charley would

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say to me. ‘I’m not goin’ near that woman—she’s always studyin’ me!’ he’d say.

“And he was right—she *was* studying him. Charley had dark skin. He was from downtown—the tenements.

“We used to meet up near Florida Avenue and walk up Georgia to Griffith Stadium, watching the Grays play.

“My mother, though—she wouldn’t—didn’t like me hanging around Charley. She believed that we had some—a way of life to uphold. We had to be—I can’t say exactly—some kind of role models. As if we were the talented tenth.

“Yes, that’s how she saw us. Dunbar, Howard—though I didn’t go to Howard. I went to Penn—not the best school for geology...”

He stopped for a moment; then was lost, drifting into deep time.

I sat, thinking about the humidity, the heat. I felt my sweat soaking my shirt, my underwear.

I closed my lids.

## 28.5

“The earth is a cauldron,” he said.  
“Always boiling, bubbling.  
“Always changing.



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“I was always fascinated by metamorphic rock. Rock that, over time—through heat, pressure—was pushed and pressed, folded— changed.”

At that, he pulled from his pocket a rock—handing it to me.

It was gray, with streaks of white—lines crisscrossing.

“You always carry this?” I asked, reaching to hand it back.

“No,” he said, “you keep it. I found it this evening, while poking around out here. When I see a rock like that, I can’t help but pick it up—look it over—hold onto

it for a while. Sometimes, I'll hold onto them for years.

“That one is gneiss—billions of years old, most likely. It doesn't belong here. It was once something else—a different kind of rock —minerals. The bands you see represent the different minerals present in the rock—the mafic, felsic—they band together.

“In order to understand a rock like that, you have to bring your mind back.”

He turned to stare at me—as if expecting me to bring my mind back, slowing it down to geologic time.

I turned away, again closing my lids.

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I tried not to think about the  
humidity, the heat. My sweat.

I imagined myself younger, a child.

I was born.

Then younger even—not born.

My mother—a child—not born.

My grandparents as children—then  
not yet born.

My great-grandparents—children—  
not yet born.

Deeper and deeper I went—watching  
the earth move, rising and falling, pushing  
and pulling—ice caps growing, receding—

dinosaurs growing, then dying—continents moving, crashing.

“Sometimes,” he said, “it’s easier to imagine rocks as liquid. Imagine that that rock there, in your hand, is a liquid. Only, you are moving so much faster than it—you are speeding around, as fast as light—so that it seems as if the rock is solid.

“Now, imagine that all of the earth’s layers are liquids—each of varying speeds. You are moving fast—above them, hovering, watching them flow. Some liquids move faster than other—some even as fast as you—even faster. But most liquids move

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slow, relative to your own speed. Do you see them?”

I nodded; in my mind’s eye, I saw myself hovering over the earth, watching the mountains flow, the land flow, the rivers flow—all at differing speeds.

I was outside of time.

“Good,” he said. “Good. Now, you also need to imagine that some liquids are thicker than others. This makes them move more slowly—but it also allows them to push the other liquids aside. If a thick liquid pushes up against a thin liquid, then the thick liquid will push the thin liquid up into

the air—or perhaps down—or, sometimes, two liquids of the same thickness and speed meet up, and they rise up together.

“See them now, in your mind: flowing—moving—rising—pushing—mixing—sinking—meandering—blending together.”

He grew silent.

“Do you see them?” he asked.

Again, I nodded.

## 28.6

At some point, I opened my lids.

I looked over at Lyon. He was sitting staring at the ground.

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“Come on,” I said standing.

We went inside—a flush of cold air.

Lyon walked straight into the elevator—the doors closing between us.

## **28.7**

I went into my bathroom, splashing water on my face.

Looking in the mirror, I saw that I’d sweated through my shirt.

I undressed and turned on the shower; then went out and turned on the AC; then back into the bathroom, turning off the light, stepping behind the curtain.

I placed my palms against the shower wall, leaning forward under the stream.

I was reeling, still trying to bring my mind back from eons past. The water was running down my back—liquid—and I felt as if it was land, a tectonic plate, sliding over my skin, which was crust—mantle.

I could feel my blood churning now—bubbling, bringing forth heat, magma.

## **28.8**

I sat in my living room, wearing only a towel, letting the cool conditioned air cover my skin.



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I was on the couch, looking out through the open windows.

I thought about Lyon, and how little I knew about him. How he was still just a shadow to me, even as I slowly pieced together his past.

It was the same with Mally—with Rong—Ximena—how much did I know of them, really?

With Mally, I knew the masks he wore—but was that it? Was there nothing beneath the smoke and mirrors?

Ximena labeled herself an activist—that told me something about her, about how

she wanted to be seen; she was adamant that she was not a lobbyist, not the same as Mr. Knox.

And Rong, who'd shown me more and more of herself over the years—even confiding in me about her miscarriage.

*Was this how it worked—seeing the insides of people? Was the outside—the way they acted, the way they presented themselves—a representation of some inner core? A patchwork quilt—piecing together various public masks? Or were the masks—were they, instead, only so much skin?*

*Or was it the other way around—geology turned inside out—the insides a*

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*reflection of the outer presentation—the inner-self becoming, over time, an accumulation of public personas?*

*And what was I—what am I? My thoughts? My DNA? The way I act at work—at home—in public—in private? Or was the real me the me now, sitting on the couch in just a towel, thinking thoughts that would never be resolved?*

*Does me live in the past—the present—the future—or all three at once? Which me gets the final say as the definitive me—the public me or the private me? The me of the past, the present, or the future?*

## 29.1

Most of the time, though, life is just living—routine—habit.

I rode the elevator up to our floor; I walked down the hallway.

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I noticed a body in my old closet-office—I leaned in.

“Hello,” I said.

“Oh—hi,” she said, standing from behind her desk.

“Are you new here?”

“Yes, I—I just started today. My name’s Jessie—Jessica McDowell.”

We shook hands.

“I’m Fox,” I said.

“Fox—oh—Mr. Gray?”

“Yes—that’s me.”

She smiled, flustered.

“I’m supposed to be working for you,” she said.

## 29.2

A phone call comes through.

“A Ms. Gass,” says Kelly.

I pick up the phone.

“Mr. Gray?”

“Yes.”

“This is Ms. Gass. I would like to arrange to speak with you about a most urgent matter.”

“What is it, exactly, Ms. Gass?”

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“It is—I can’t say over the phone,  
exactly. It would be better to speak in  
person.”

I hold the phone against my chin,  
looking at the office—the bustle.

“Alright,” I say.

### 29.3

We meet for lunch—D Street.

Under the green awning,  
windows with rows of panes.

Ms. Gass stands and strides,  
wearing a green skirt, a black blouse.

“A pleasure to finally meet you,  
Mr. Gray.”

We shake hands; we sit; we order  
(crab cakes, sirloin).

Sliding in a booth leather—she  
opposite, sitting in a chair white.

“What can I help you with?” I  
ask.

She smiles.

“I’ve just heard so much about  
you, Mr. Gray—I had to meet you.”

I order wine.

## 29.4

I take Jessica—Jessie for a walk.



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“Why did you want this job?” I ask.

“Because,” she says, as in a fever—fingernails curled tight against thumbs, “I love language—I love looking at the meaning of words.”

“But you could’ve—that leaves open many different jobs—a teacher, a philologist maybe—”

“Meaningless words!” she says, excited now.

We cross onto the Mall.

“Words need to be rooted in the past *and* the present. This office shows the

real impact of powerful words—word that connect to America’s past, words that shape how today’s Americans live their lives...”

We continue walking; she continues talking—youthful exuberance, optimism, idealism...

## 29.5

“Who hired her?” I ask Mally.

He’s come into my office, ready for this question.

It’s the end of the day, and most everyone has gone home.

“Well...” he says, wandering about, hands casually placed in pockets.

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He coughs.

“No one, really—she was appointed.”

“Appointed?”

Mally comes over to my desk; he sits in the chair across from my own; he crosses his legs. Behind him, I see Rong watching us—furtively glancing up, then down at her phone, then up again.

“Like you, Mr. Gray. You were appointed by one Administration—Ms. McDowell was appointed—by another Administration.”

“But *why* was she appointed?”

He folds his hands, his fingers.

“Usually—when someone is appointed—by a new Administration—it is to—to counterbalance the way things are—the status quo.”

“So,” I say, leaning toward him, “I’m the status quo.”

He moues—then sucks in his lips—twiddles his thumbs —looks me in the eyes.

“In a manner of speaking...”

## 29.6

I go home.

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I order shrimp and black bean  
sauce from *Kongming's* off 18<sup>th</sup> Street.

The meal comes, and I sit and eat  
and watch television—a detective show.

## 30.1

Symbols stick to the brain—to memory; that is to say, symbols provide a focal point around which memory coalesces. Most people, I'd be willing to bet, have at one point or another experienced apophenia

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—the feeling that a particular symbol’s coincidental reappearance portends some kind of *pattern* or *meaning*. Humans can make meaning out of mud. We like to find patterns in even those events that have no order; in so doing, we create what we purport to describe.

I knew a girl in high school who was convinced that the number 44 had some cosmic synchronistic meaning. She ever always wore the number around her neck.

“Explain it to me again,” I said.

“44 is a double number. It is itself.”

“So is 33, 22, 11, 55—”

“Hold on—I’m not finished. 44 is good luck here, but bad luck in China. 44 is a secret number. When I was born, it was 44 minutes after 10 o’clock. My grandmother was 44 years old when she gave birth to my mother...”

She talked like this for some time. Of course, I could do nothing to convince her. For a while, when I would see her, I would talk about the number 55 and how



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special it was; but then I got bored with that, and I even began to feel like a jerk.

## 30.2

When I was nine or ten years old, I went digging around our old library. It was a dusty place—a maze, with nooks, warrens, dead-ends. I found a big book of ancient symbols, and immediately latched onto the *three hares*. I even convinced my mom to buy me a small wooden carving of the symbol (I think I still have it somewhere), about the size of a coaster. After about three months, though, I grew bored with the idea.

When I was in my late-teens/early-twenties, I was obsessed with the idea of *motion*. I would walk around, saying the word *motion* in my head. *The key to everything*, I would say to myself, *is motion*. *Motion explains life*. I even began writing a mini-treatise (notes, really) on how *motion* is the answer to all questions that need be asked—the key to all mythologies. I don't really remember what happened to that idea—I suppose it just faded away.

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I'm getting tired—that's what it is.

I go knocking for Lyon—he doesn't answer.

I go out for a walk.  
Down 18<sup>th</sup>—Florida—U Street—  
walking.

Walking, walking, walking.

It's hot outside, too hot, and I need to get away from it, but it won't go away, and I can't get away.

I walk.

My head is hot—a fever.

Walking—crossing a bridge—  
into the country.

I walk down a side road—*how far  
have I walked—how many miles?*

Now I'm back in the city—a  
different city—*where am I?*

I see gas stations—car dealers—a  
bar. I walk inside.

The room is empty, save a few  
old souls.

I sit down; I order a beer.

“Where am I?” I ask the  
bartender.

He looks at me.

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“*The Place*,” he says.

“No—I mean, where am I?”

He looks at me.

“DC,” he says.

“Where in DC?”

“Southeast—Minnesota Avenue.”

He watches me for a moment,  
then walks back to the other customers.

I look around at the other  
customers.

## 30.5

I call a cab.

“Where?” they say.

I tell them.

“We don’t go there,” they say.

They hang up.

I call another cab company.

“We don’t go there,” they say.

“I’ll pay you double,” I say.

They come.

When they pull up, I am standing outside the bar. The cab circles around the lot twice, then stops to let me in.

“Thanks,” I say.

The driver nervously looks me over; then drives us away.

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Anything and everything is potentially a symbol. A rock—a word—a color—a flag.

We latch onto these things, infusing them with meaning.

A rock serves as a memory marker—reminding us of that day on the beach.

A word gives a fixed meaning to the vagueness of emotions, memories, thoughts.

A color creates a finite line within the spectrum.

A flag symbolizes a particular group, serving as a reminder of their unity.

Genes—DNA—they, too, are symbols. What is a gene? What is DNA?

### 30.7

I get home and call Ximena.

“Sure,” she says, “I’ll be right over.”

She comes over; we have sex; she sleeps.



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## 31.1

The prison reform—  
*reorganization*—legislation has returned. It  
coughed—sputtered—went to select  
committee (purgatory)—and now is back.

Mally invites me to lunch; there, we are surrounded by union representatives cum lobbyists.

“It’s starting to look,” Mally says to them, with unusual directness, “like this reorganization will be as much public as it is private.”

As they spoke, my eyes wandered around the room, looking over the other tables, the familiar faces—Ms. Williamson, a former Congresswoman, now in mining; Ms. Peterson, representing the auto workers; Mr. Lane, representing Wisconsin’s 2<sup>nd</sup> District; Mr. Alexander, a reporter; Mr. Novak, a former Senator, now in finance; Ms. Cowan,

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a Senate staffer...the clinking of forks and knives against plates, glasses dancing in the light, teeth showing, wrists upturned—steak, salmon, potatoes, ham, bread, clams, peas, corn, carrots all lifted and lowered into waiting mouths.

Afterwards, as we're leaving, Ms. Peterson comes across the room, grabbing my forearm.

“Mr. Gray,” she says, “so good to see you!”

I smile, nod.

“Mr. Gray—if it’s not too much trouble, I wonder if I might visit with you sometime soon. It is most urgent...”

## 31.2

Jessie and I get into a discussion about the meaning of meaning.

We’re sitting alone in my office, Rong having gone home for the evening.

Jessie has her back against the window.

I look at her: a boring blue pantsuit—pink blouse; straight blond hair; ostrich eyes.

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“Imagine,” I’m saying, “someone saying: ‘Let me ax you a question.’”

“Alright,” she says.

“Does it bother you? Or do you let it slide?”

“Well—*ax* is more a matter of pronunciation than a definition—but—but I would still say that it is incorrect.”

“Does pronunciation matter?”

“Yes—yes, I think it does.”

“So there are *correct* and *incorrect* pronunciations of words, just as there are *correct* and *incorrect* uses of words?”

“Yes.”

“If someone said, ‘Let me ax you a question,’ would you know what they meant?”

“Of course.”

“Which would be?”

“Which—well, they meant *ask*. They said ax, but they meant ask.”

“So, even though they didn’t pronounce it the way you liked —what you call the *correct* way—you still understood them.”

“In spite of their incorrect pronunciation, yes. But it would still bother me. Things like that always bother me. I’m

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the kind of person who writes letters to the newspaper about grammar errors.”

“So—but, getting back to ‘ax’, is that just because you study language—is that why you were able to understand them? Or is it—was it something else?”

She stops to think.

I press. “What does *correct* mean?”

“Correct means—according to the rules.”

“Alright, good—but what if everyone in your community —the community you grew up in—pronounces it

*ax*—then wouldn't it be *incorrect* to pronounce it *ask*?"

"Then—then—"

"Is that entire community *wrong*—or *incorrect*?"

Her palms are on her knees, and she lifts the fingers toward me, looking at her nails.

"For us—for our work, at least, we only have one community —the Federal community—the entire nation, so—so that kind of local variance can't be considered."

"You mean," I say, standing, coming around my desk, "that we have to have a *National* definition with a *National*



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pronunciation. So should we have a  
*National Dictionary?*”

“Well, perhaps—maybe that  
would be good...”

I nod.

A wide circle, I walk around the  
room, my arms crossed —coming again  
behind my desk and grabbing my sportcoat  
draped over the back of my chair. I glance  
over at Jessie—she nods—smiles.

*I am the status quo*, I keep  
thinking, *am I then conditioning her—*

*training her? Or are we just having a conversation? Where is the counterbalance?*

“Why don’t we go grab a drink?”

I ask.

She looks surprised—then  
recovers.

“Ok,” she says, “alright.”

We head out into the summer  
evening air.

### **31.3**

Ms. Peterson looks at me like I  
am chocolate cake.

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“Thank you so much, Mr. Gray,” she says, briefly touching my hand, “you really are such a kind man.”

Her face is glowing—a wine glass in her hand, slightly tilted, rolling yellow. We sit in the back of the bar, facing the crowd.

Across the room, I see Mr. Knox enter the restaurant.

“I hope you don’t mind,” I say, glancing at Ms. Peterson, “but I invited a few friends.”

“Oh—” she utters—then stops herself, looking around, saying, “of course not...”

I wave to Mr. Knox, and he comes and leans, taking Ms. Peterson’s hand.

All smiles, they exchange greetings.

“Emma,” he says, “good to see you.”

“So nice to see you, Zachary!”

Mr. Knox sits, briefly looking awkward.

Then, near the entrance, we both see Ximena enter, and he stands, moving to greet her.

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The two say something, making their way over to our table.

### 31.4

“Meanings change,” says Jessie, “yes, alright—but it—it’s not something that happens overnight. It may be—may be a word from Old English changes meaning when it comes through William the Conqueror —and into contemporary usage. But—month to month, year to year, words just don’t change like that—they stay the same. So—no, one country keeping the same meaning for hundreds of years—yes,

that makes sense. The meanings—the words used in the Constitution, the Declaration—they don't change—they haven't changed yet.”

She stops to take a breath—her face flushed.

I imagine her debating this issue in law school with her friends—out, late at night, drinking—no, inside, in their apartment, sitting on the couch in sweatpants, surrounded by books, candles, framed prints of impressionist painters.

I wave for the waiter.

“I'm hungry,” I say, “would you like something to eat?”

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Drinking, she lowers her glass,  
pulling in her bottom lip—nodding.

The waiter comes, handing us  
menus; we order.

“Let’s see,” I say, “1066 to—to  
when? 1776? Or earlier?”

“1066?”

“William the Conqueror.”

“Oh—oh, yes,” she says, “well—”

“How about this—is British  
English the same as American English?”

“No, they’re—”

“So that’s when? 1776—no, it  
has to be earlier. But it wasn’t 1066, either—

it wasn't a sudden change. It was—when? Modern English—after the vowels shifted? That's pronunciation, isn't it—that's a pronunciation date—the 1500s, I'd say."

As I talk, I look off into the ceiling, the tin tiles scrolled and filigreed.

"I'm trying," I say, looking at her as the waiter comes, refilling our drinks, "to pinpoint the timeline—to see how long it takes to change meanings. Because it's been over two hundred years now since the Constitution was written."

*Why is she looking at me—at her drink with the look of a schoolchild who's been reprimanded?*



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I sit quiet for a moment, waiting to see if she'll pick up the conversation.

### 31.5

Ms. Peterson is drunk. We others sit sobered.

“No,” she is saying, “Zach here is a clothes hound—just look at him! My god,” grabbing his lapel, “what is this—no, no—what is it? It’s—it’s *Reiss*, it says—what is that? What is that?”

I realize then that she is asking me; I shrug.

“Do you like it?” she asks.

I make noncommittal noises,  
gestures.

“I love it!” she says, slapping the table. “Hey—you—Mr. Gray—what’s your first name, by the way?”

“Fox.”

“Fox? Fox? Are you Native American or something? Oh— oh yeah, I knew your name. Hey, Foxy—what’s the deal with this prison legislation—what’s going on with that, huh? I mean, ‘cause I really need to work this shit out.”

Mr. Knox stands, taking her arm.

“I think it’s time to go home, Emma,” he says.

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We stand to help him.

“No—no, but what’s the deal?

What—are you gonna fuck over my workers? Huh?”

We walk her outside, looking for a cab.

Mr. Knox walks down the street.

“Ah, shit—I’m sorry, Foxy,” says Ms. Peterson. “I’m sorry.”

She turns and leans against me, her palms flat on my chest. I look over at Ximena, and we smile each.

Mr. Knox comes, followed by a cab. He opens the door, and we lower Ms. Peterson inside.

“No vomiting!” says the cabby, yelling. “I don’t want no vomiting!”

“I’ll ride her home,” Mr. Knox says to us, and closes the door.

We stand there watching them go, and I wave goodbye.

## **31.6**

Gradually, I notice that Jessie talks in bursts: she sits quiet, listening, looking berated, drinking, eating—then, when the time is right, she releases a

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stream—mandering, adding colloquies, addendums, parentheses—then, as abruptly, grows silent, returning to her dormant state, waiting as would an alligator, re-collecting her energy.

“Our job,” she says, “is to—you can’t rule a moving ship—a moving castle—country. The ship of the country—any country is always moving forward, in some sense, and language is always moving forward, too—I know that, *I know how language works*. But—to fix definitions — words need to be fixed. In order for the social contract to work, the terms of

agreement need to be set in stone. We can't—the social contract is forever—”

“A process,” I interject.

“A—alright, a process—but—no—the terms of agreement are *not* a process—the terms last forever. Just like the Constitution lasts forever—the words of the Constitution last forever. So—anything else is just translation—translation from one century to the next. So, we can't rewrite the Constitution—and the *US Code* and *The Code of Federal Regulations*—we can't rewrite those—all of those—every single year—just because they need to be—just so that we can translate them into common

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contemporary vernacular or slang.

Because—because, also, it's just unnecessary!

We don't need to use vernacular, when those words last forever—or, at least, as near as forever."

"What about welfare?" I ask—  
trying to catch her before she recedes.

"Welfare?"

"As a for instance—does the word *welfare* mean the same as it did when the Constitution was written?"

"Yes—I believe so."

"So what does it mean?"

“Well,” she moves her hands about, “I’d have to research it fully to—just like any word—to really know—wouldn’t that be correct?”

“Sure,” I say, nodding, biting into my steak, “but just for fun—off the top of your head. What does it mean?”

She starts—then stops herself, bending her head, lost in thought.

## 31.7

Ximena and I walk to the metro.  
Escalators down to escalators.

We wait for the train.

“I’m not like her,” she says.



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“What—who?” I ask, looking at her.

The train comes; we board; we sit.

Ximena is lost in thought, lulled by the rocking.

We exit at Columbia Heights—riding escalators up to ground level.

## 31.8

“No,” she says finally, looking up, “I can’t define *welfare*— really, I can’t define any word without doing research. I just—that’s how I think. I need to be in the midst

of books in order to—in order to see the meanings of words.”

“But words are lived. We use words not just in books and documents and briefs and bills and acts—but in everyday language—in phone conversations, emails, letters—even text messages.”

“But they have—those words have no legal standing—for the most part—I know, there are exceptions.”

“But is there really such a bright line between the living, spoken word, and the dead words of written language? Isn’t there any overlap? Any cross-contamination?”

“Cross contamination?”

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“Living words shaping the meaning—the interpretation of dead words. When the people who implement and interpret *The Code* and *Code 2*—aren’t they using their everyday commonsense understandings of the terms?”

“No—at least, they shouldn’t be. They should only be using the meanings we provide for them—the definitions given by us.”

The waiter comes with the check;  
I pay.

We exit the restaurant, Jessie fast heading toward a cab.

“On Monday—at work,” I say calling after her, “I’d like you to do some research and come up with a working definition of *welfare*. That will be your first project.”

Curt, she nods.

We each call out goodnight, and I head home feeling like a boss, an indoctrinator.

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Walking through Ximena's neighborhood—unfamiliar, dark—my nerves tense up.

“It's perfectly safe here,” she says, sensing my concern.

I frown.

Seeing my skepticism, she continues, saying, “There're a few car thefts—but everything else is gang related. They stay away from us regular folk.”

We walk through a crowd standing outside, into her building. We take the stairs up to her apartment.

Inside, she walks into the living room; I use the bathroom. I look out through the window as I piss, down at the crowd below. Young men and women stand—jostling—then settling, sitting, drinking.

Ximena is sitting on the couch when I come out, fanning herself, drinking.

She hands me a glass, and I drink.

“It’s hot,” she says.

“Yeah,” I say, sitting.

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We sit like that for a while,  
drinking, cooling ourselves against the heat.  
Voices rise from outside, then fall again.

My eyes are shut when Ximena  
asks, “What was that prison legislation she  
was talking about?”

I shrug.

“Legislation is legislation,” I say.

“Reforming prisons?”

“So they say.”

I can hear her talking, but it’s too  
late—my head is heavy, and I am drifting off  
to sleep.

## 32.1

Gulls creeing, hovering against  
and within the wind.

I got off the bus, walking into the  
terminal. Inside, I saw a row of vending



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machines—I walked over, buying a bag of corn chips, a bottle of water.

Through the lobby, I went to the window.

“I’d like a ticket, please.”

“Car or foot?”

“Uh—I’ll be walking.”

“Round trip?”

“Yes.”

Outside, I called my mom.

“I just bought a ticket.”

“Oh—you’re here already? That was fast. Well—what do you think?”

“I dunno yet. It’s quiet here.  
Smells like the ocean.”

“Wait till you get on the ferry.”

We talk for a while more, then I  
hang up and walk over to the railing, looking  
out into the bay. In the distance—a speck—  
the ferry appears, coming in.

## 32.2

Marcus calls me up, inviting me  
out to lose money.

“And bring something to drink,”  
he says.

I remember him drinking Wild  
Turkey, so I stop and buy a bottle.

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His face lights up.

“There we go!” he says, bringing me into the house.

We walk back to the kitchen; he takes the bottle and pours two drinks.

“They’re on their way,” he says, handing me my glass.

I drink.

He walks past me, into the living room, and I follow.

He sits in a leather chair, says, “Why don’t we check out the game while we’re waiting.”

I sit on the couch.

On the screen, the Nationals are losing, 10-3.

### 32.3

The attendant waves me over, taking my ticket.

“Go on aboard,” she says, gesturing with her head.

I walk across the metal grate, water down below, onto the ferry. A door says *Passengers*, so I open it and walk in. Inside—a row of benches next to small square windows.

I walk down the row, a bathroom on the right—out the back door.

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Out the back, an attendant is  
waving cars on, guiding them.

Behind him is the ocean.

The ferry is churning, tossing  
bubbles out behind itself. I stand and watch  
the foam for a while, then turn to watch the  
cars loading—a pickup—a motorcycle—a  
concrete truck, rotating.

After a while, I turn back to look  
at the ocean.

In the distance—ocean.

The foghorn blasts, making me  
jump. I turn and look up at the cabin.

I decide to walk around the ferry.

I walk down the sides, leaning  
over as I go, watching the waves fan out from  
the hull. For a while, we pass bobbing  
buoys—then nothing.

I walk back through the  
*Passengers* room, now half-filled with bodies  
sitting napping, looking out through the  
windows, holding children on laps.

Out through the door, I turn up  
the stairway, out into the air blowing against  
my face. A lone woman sits on the bench—  
with her, at her feet, a black-and-white dog.

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She smiles at me; I smile back.  
I stand and lean on the railing,  
looking out at the passing waves.

### 32.5

“I was on Minnesota Avenue a  
few nights ago.”

“What were you doing over  
there?”

“I got lost—walking—a bar called  
*The Place*.”

“Bad news—it used to be one of  
those nasty strip joints.”

“What’s it like over there?”

“Where’s that—Greenway?  
Benning? It’s not as bad as some places—  
there’s projects, but there’s some nice houses  
over there, too.”

“Housing projects?”

“Mm.”

The game came back on, and he  
turned up the volume. Soon, the other  
players came, Mike, Gregg, along with other  
younger friends of Mike, drinks in hand, and  
we were introduced, began to play cards.



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The evening long, I had difficulty talking. I found myself listening to pronunciation—diction—the rhythms of language spoken. The drunker they got, the more Mike and the younger guys used DC slang—drawing out their words, switching tenses.

“She done that last week...”

“That’s *real live*...”

“He’s straight bama, always wearing those damn striped pants...”

“Yeah that yungun, he *was* ji drunk...”

I was unable to speak, nodding; then, the next moment, adopting their ways of talking—then again paralyzed, afraid that I would misspeak, misusing the cant I was learning—the accents, pronunciation.

By the end of the night, even as half-drunk as I was, I was mostly silent. On my way out the door, Marcus asked if I was alright, and I only nodded, walking out into the dark. As I rode in the cab home, I felt disoriented, trying to remember how to talk the way I was used to talking. Words rolled around my head, mixing syllables, diphthongs, vocalizations. I went to sleep

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that night with dreams akin to *Alice in Wonderland*.

## 32.7

Entering the small outer islands, we come into the fog.

The horn begins sounding once every two-three minutes. Through the mist, I see cormorants slick sliding into the water—then, minutes later, popping up—then curling again under the surface. The shores of the islands are rocky, covered in seaweed and stones, shells, docks leading up to houses surrounded by evergreens.

Soon, seagulls appear, hovering over the boat. More and more buoys bounce upon the waves—red and green, striped, blue, orange, pink, black.

## 32.8

The ferry turns, and, for a moment, the fog lifts, and I see ahead of us the island, the terminal; then again the fog descends, obscuring the view ahead.

The horn sounds.

Cars turn on their engines.

The ferry slows—then turns around, backing in.

We stop.

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Cars begin unloading. I make my way down to the *Passenger* cabin. A line of passengers forms, waiting at the door.

We walk out onto the deck of the ferry, then across and onto land.

My mother is standing smiling, arms open.

### 33.1

Coming home from school,  
kindergarten age, into the kitchen; if my  
mom was home from work, she'd sit and tell  
me just-so stories. We would sit in the  
kitchen, at the wooden table, eating a snack.

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As she talked, she used her hands to gesture, as if she were creating shadows without the light.

“Once upon a time, all the bears in China were black. The leader of the bears was named Xiao Hei. He lived in the mountains, amongst the trees.

“Xiao Hei was a fat, lazy king. He was also stubborn. Instead of getting his own food, he forced others to get the food for him. A group of bears would go out into the forest, collecting and stripping leaves.

“One day, a messenger came to the bears. He was a grey hawk, named Zhong Fen.

“‘Lord Xiao Hei,’ he said, ‘I come bearing bad news. A glacier is moving south, coming to cover the forest. If your people do not move soon, they will die!’

“‘I know of no glacier,’ said Xiao Hei. ‘You have only come here to frighten us, Zhong Fen.’ And with that, he sent the grey hawk away.

“The other bears came to warn Xiao Hei.



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“Dear Leader,’ they said,  
‘perhaps Zhong Fen is telling the truth.  
Why would he lie to us?’

“All birds are liars,’ responded  
Xiao Hei.

“The other bears counseled Xiao  
Hei again and again, but he would not  
respond.

“Angry, one of the bears spoke  
up. His name was Qiang Xin.

“We must form a group and  
leave on our own,’ said Qiang Xin. ‘If we do  
not, then all bears will die.’

“Qiang Xin formed a small group of bears willing to join him. The rest of the bears stayed loyal to Xiao Hei. The group moved across the forest, leaving the bear clan behind.

“Soon, the glacier came, destroying the forest, killing Xiao Hei and his followers. Qiang Xin saw the glacier coming, and realized that if he did not do something they would not survive. Desperate, he took his son, Xiong Mao, aside, telling him what he must do.

“‘My son,’ said Qiang Xin, ‘you must gather all your young friends, and hide

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in the small caves. We will not survive, but you are small enough to live.

“Xiong Mao was saddened, but he realized that his father was right. He gathered all of the younger bears, and they hid in the small caves of the forest.

“Soon, the glacier came, killing Qiang Xin and the older bears. The ice moved fast, seeping into the caves. The younger bears were covered in the cold ice, but they did not die. Living in the caves kept them alive.

“In the Spring, Xiong Mao and the other young bears emerged. The forest

was beginning rebirth—plants were growing. The ice melted from the bears' coats, and they noticed that now their covering was not only black, but also white. The ice had made the bears spotted and striped with white against their black fur. These black-and-white bears elected Xiong Mao their leader. Their descendants still live in China today.”

## 33.2

September Sunday.

An election is looming. Political advertising consumes the airwaves.

“Tom Vickson worked for a big bank in New York. He was part of the

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subprime loan crisis. Is this the kind of man you want representing you in the House? Vote for Mary Hudson for Virginia's 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. She won't be approving any shady loans. Instead, she'll be approving your freedom."

I turn off the television.

I go out, walking to the metro.  
Escalators down to escalators.

The train is filled with tourists—wearing backpacks, pushing carriages, carrying maps, water bottles, bags, children. I stand between a husband and wife arguing

about the best way to get to the Air and Space Museum—before I can interrupt, the train stops, and they run off, yanking their children behind them.

At Chinatown, I switch trains.

Archives—L’Enfant—

Waterfront—Navy Yard.

The train empties as we cross the river.

Anacostia—I exit.

### 33.3

In college, studying evolutionary psychology, I grew reacquainted with just-so stories. My first experience was in a course

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called: *Apes, Anger: Humans, Wars*. The first month or so, I loved the class. Then, slowly, I began to have my doubts.

“Humans—males, especially,” said the professor, “cannot help but strive for war. War is part of our evolutionary history. It is who we are. It is the same with rape and all male-dominated human events. We are programmed to follow these most basic emotions.”

It was the word *programmed* that bothered me most, calling to mind

computation—as if genes were part of some code, making intelligence already artificial.

“But we’re not like chimpanzees,” I said to my professor in his office, “we have so many differences—”

“Of course,” he said, pedantic, yet avoiding my eyes, “chimpanzees and humans are different branches from the same tree. We are of the same tribe, but still very different.”

“So just because chimpanzees may get angry...”

He turned from me, standing to grab books from the shelf.



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“Here,” he said, handing them to me. “It’s good you’re asking questions-- probing beyond the generalities. Now, if you’d really like to learn more, read these books. And, if you’re still curious after that, research their bibliographies. See what you come up with.”

I looked down at the books, stacked now on my lap.

He nodded, which I took as my cue to leave the office; I stood and walked out.

As I walked up the hill, tired, I cursed myself for choosing Anacostia over the Benning Ridge station. Places that seemed close on the map, in walking were miles apart.

Over and over, I asked myself what I was doing here. I got the idea in my head that I needed to see housing projects. For years, I wondered what a housing project looked like. In *The Code*, the actual term was avoided—now they were called *new communities*. *Code 2* called them *public housing*. I recalled a passage from PHW, reading: “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”

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Something compelled me to see what these *decent homes* looked like.

### 33.5

But the more books, the more journal articles read, the more convinced I was that my professor was wrong. There was no direct transmission of chimpanzee psychology into human terms. Just because a group of chimpanzees in Gambia lived a certain way, that didn't mean that humans were fated to live in the same way.

I began creating my own just-so stories.

*Children tell lies to their parents. This is because children must learn deception in order to survive.*

*Humans elect representatives. This is because humans cannot survive alone—they need to form groups.*

*Women like chocolate. This is because chocolate contains estrogen and other drugs, which help women to reproduce, which furthers the species.*

*Men like to drink beer. Beer helps men add winter weight. Drinking beer is also a way to affirm masculinity.*

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I wrote pages and pages of such stories, creating even elaborate social structures, game theories to explain away our more simple actions. But, of course, I knew that they were just stories, nothing more.

## 33.6

Soon, I was in the midst of them, surrounded by long brick buildings with rows of windows leading to more long brick buildings with rows of windows. They ran along the road, with small patches of grass in front. I went down a side road, seeing the

cars parked behind, trees dressing the sidewalks.

A few schoolchildren walked past, talking.

Around the backside of the building, I noticed small blue balconies hanging off the side, in rows, each with rows of pickets, each with chairs behind the rails.

I continued walking, back up to Minnesota Avenue. More long buildings with rows of windows—these, slightly taller than long, with light-colored brick. Hedges lined the sidewalk.

Green awnings above the doors.

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The avenue widens, and suddenly I am at a large intersection—cars, buses moving fast. Ahead, across the bridge, tall buildings; to my right, middle-class homes with porches, lawns; to my left, what looks like a highway. I turn right.

### 33.7

After college, I continued to tell just-so stories to myself. It was a kind of game (one that I still play sometimes even today) —something to keep my mind occupied. The idea was that any human characteristic, any psychological state, could

be described in terms of an evolutionary just-so story, a back-formation of *the way things were*. Humans say or do or think X now; the reason they do X is because of Y, with Y being an evolutionary constraint.

My friend in law school, Connor, had a habit of biting his nails. Now that humans were no longer hunter-gatherers, they did not know what to do with their hands. He was conditioned to do this, because he needed to occupy his hands and teeth.

My neighbor, a woman named Divya, was a slave to her dog, a boxer. This slavishness was a result of the hunter-



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gatherer relationship with wolves, which were soon selectively bred, domesticated. Divya used her dog (whose name was Sarama), as a protector, a male-substitute. When people passed—especially men (especially black men)—she used the dog as a shield, warning away predators (or the modern-day equivalent: potential muggers).

I didn't really believe any of these stories, at least not in such a straightforward manner; yet I continued to tell them to myself out of habit, even also to simply pass the time. And, over time, I suppose, they at

least minimally influenced the way I interacted with these people, no matter how much I may have consciously resisted their simplistic summations of behavior. In a way, my struggle with these stories of my own creation was yet another symptom of my present-self's constant conflict with my past-self's fabrications. *What is my own just-so story?*

## 33.8

After climbing another hill, I pass more houses with porches and siding, chimneys, lawns, a baseball field, stone walls, brick walls, awnings. The road widens into

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four lanes, a sidewalk along the edge where I walk alongside the metal fences, trees, continuing to slowly climb, trees on the right, houses on the left, soon reaching a plateau, coming to more brick buildings—square this time, with rows of windows, green lawns. Busses pass by, stopping briefly to pick up passengers.

After the trees comes a suburban-looking neighborhood, and I feel like I am coming into what looks like a small country town. Then, down a hill, I suddenly see gas stations, a grocery store, people walking, people waiting for the bus—and, over there,

to my left, a metro station—Benning. I look around the neighborhood one last time, then decide to go in. Escalators down to escalators. Switching lines, riding the train, walking home.

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## 34.1

On the way to work, I overhear passengers debating local elections.

“Last time the Republicans won Virginia, which means this time the Democrats will win.”

“I doubt it’s as simple as all that.”

“It may not be, but it always ends up that way.”

Emerging from the metro, I walk across for coffee—then sit in the park. Soon, she comes, standing and looking at me with those big bright eyes. Then, turning, she is gone. Distracted, even almost sighing, I walk off to work.

Jessie is waiting for me with her weeks of research. I take the file to my desk.

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Sitting, drinking coffee, I put up my feet,  
flipping open the folder, reading:

*Welfare: welfare is explicitly  
distinct from health; however, health  
and welfare are two sides of the same  
coin, opposite, but working toward  
the same end: the well-being of the  
citizen.*

*The concept of welfare itself is  
always thus defined; not through  
what it is, but through: 1) what is  
does, and 2) what it is not.*

*Looking at Title 42 of The US Code and Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations, we can see a list of things that welfare “does”, including (but not limited to): child support, arts support, legal services, education, unemployment, low-income housing, flood relief, energy conservation...etc. We can also see a list of things that welfare “is not”, most explicitly through those things that welfare “once was”, but were later repealed. For instance, welfare once concerned itself with:*



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*quarantine, leprosy, infant hygiene,  
open land, etc.*

*Congress and the Supreme Court  
both are still uncertain as to how far  
and how much welfare is connected  
to “housing” and “land use”...*

The report began beautifully,  
then went on for fifteen-twenty pages or so,  
digging into etymologies, fixed meanings  
from centuries past—remaining wholly  
within the legal realm. Needless to say, I was  
deeply disappointed.

Reading Jessie's writings, I finally completely understood how she could be conceived of as my counterbalance; yet, to my mind, it was she who was the *status quo*. *Why, just because I had been around longer, because I was the "boss", the elder bureaucrat, was I automatically the self-perpetuating wheel—while she, simply because she was young and new, was an engine, moving us forward? Perhaps, I thought, progress was not their aim in appointing her; rather, she was there to move us backward.* Would that I could disentangle myself from metaphors of motion! For in reality (or, at least, in my mind), there was

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no *forward* or *backward* or *up* or *down*—those were only confusing stylistic simplifications, unavoidable only because humans think in analogies, metaphors that exaggerate, all too often creating and exacerbating dichotomies, differences between us, as if there were some contest determining who would “win” or “lose”, when, in fact, concepts such as winning and losing were only ever labels applied *ex post facto* by historians and members of the media.

I knew I had to find a way to talk to her, to make her see me as an ally, if not an instructor.

## 34.2

At the end of the day, I took Jessie aside.

“How about happy hour?” I asked.

“Alright,” she said, mumbling.

We went out. On our way to the bar, Ximena called, and I told her to stop by later—to first give me an hour or so alone with my coworker.

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We took a cab up to a place near my home, just off the corner of 18<sup>th</sup>, down Columbia. Crowds of office workers were beginning to form, lining the narrow sidewalks, standing at intersections, looking at lights.

Outdoor patios were half-full. It was sixty degrees and cool, one day among a score marking the slow-death of a long and humid summer. We drank gin and tonic and sangria.

“Thank you for the report on *welfare*,” I said.

“I enjoyed it,” she reported. “I felt like I was really feeling the purpose of our work. I could see, reviewing the *US Code* and the *Code of Federal Regulations* how much impact definitions truly have. I look forward to doing more reports in the future.”

When she finished, she carefully took a sip of her drink, lowering her eyes.

I watched her, seeing clearly now that she saw me as the enemy; that she was yessing me to death, a tactic that I myself had used on others in the past. Seeing her thus was at once frustrating, reflective, and disheartening. As she again sipped her

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drink, I considered the bureaucratic divide between us, wondering if I would ever be capable of getting through to her, of speaking to her outside our respective social categories. It was a question that, in so many ways, I had been asking myself my entire life.

“Jessie,” I said, angling my head, trying to get her to see my smile, “you don’t have to always talk to me like I’m your boss. I gave you the report because I wanted you to come up with your own ideas. To find your own way.”

At once I could see—especially with the phrase “find your own way”—that

I'd hit a false note. Her face noncommittal, she glanced down at the tablecloth, then over at a group of women passing, laughing.

### 34.3

“Where will the welfare report end up?”

“End—it, well we'll keep in our own files. In my office, behind my desk is a blue cabinet—I'm sure you've seen it—well, in there I store all my working drafts of definitions. And, of course, on my hard drive—but, I always search through the cabinet before beginning any new definition.”



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“But it—it’s not going to be used.”

“It will be used—*by us*, by you and me.”

“But not by them. So why’d I do it? Was it—it was just—*training*.”

I winced at the word.

“It—it is all used, in some way or another. That’s the point I’m trying to make. It wasn’t just an exercise or—or training, it —everything that we write, we keep track of, and someday, eventually, all of it is used. Or it influences what we do for the next project, how we think. You can’t

think of it as—as only the final draft is what matters, only what makes it into *Stat.* or *Code 2*—it just doesn't work that way, and if you start thinking that way, you'll be depressed most days, because most days, sixty, seventy, eighty percent of the time, we're just paving the way. It's really only one, maybe two days a week where we're writing that final draft.

“And I don't want you to think that this was just some —something I had you do to—to *test* you or something. I myself am constantly—anytime that I have a day free, I go back and define old words, looking at the Constitution, the

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Amendments—old SCOTUS cases. In fact, I asked you to define *welfare* because it's been on my mind—I've been meaning to do it for myself, but I haven't had the time."

When I could see that she was staying quiet, I continued.

"And—I mean, if you enjoyed it—then—and I enjoyed reading it, especially the idea of defining welfare by—how did you put it? *What it does and what it does not do*. That's exactly the right way to go about defining words, but showing us their use-value and their—"

“But it’s such a difficult word to define.”

Again, she immediately went to her sipping—then, stopping, looked up at me.

“Did I define it correctly?”

I sat back from the table,  
slouching.

## **34.4**

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good—let’s order something.”

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As the waiter came, I thought on the concomitance of meals and work in my world.

We asked for the menu: bar food.

“The fish sandwich with fries,” I said.

“Can I—do you have—nevermind, I’ll have the veggie burger.”

The waiter took out menus, leaving.

Across the table, she was looking at me expectantly. In her eyes, I was there—an instructor, giving her lessons, training her, disciplining her, telling her right from wrong.

*But I didn't want that!* But it was no use—the structure of our relationship demanded it of me.

### 34.5

Deliberately, I pulled at my drink, looking into the ice, the bubbles. I didn't feel like talking, instead thinking—*Why should I talk? Why do I have to? It is so very easy to hate bureaucracy, to criticize it—to think oneself outside of it, an observer offering insight. But then comes the realization that you, too, are part of the system of classification and order—it is unavoidable—that life, at least in human*

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*terms, is bureaucracy. Maybe even in any terms. When you age, you are seen by someone younger as someone older—it can't be helped. You may try to fight against it, to look or act younger, but, ineluctably, in their eyes, no matter how well you may try to mask it, you are part of an established order—tradition—the keeper of culture, the old ways. And you— moment to moment— continue to age. You take a job—you work, in order not only to survive, but also just to occupy yourself, to keep the days moving. Again, it is aging—the passage of time. And, as the days go by, inevitably, you become*

*adept at your job. You know the rules so well that they are a kind of language—something you do without thinking—second nature. You are even able to extrapolate new rules, rules that are well in line with the old rules, so that you yourself have become a rule-maker—a part of the system itself. Because to be human is to categorize, to learn and incorporate processes; and, because you have gone through that process of learning, you demonstrably are able to teach it to others.*

Drinking faster now, I began.



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“You can’t think in terms of correct or incorrect—it’s not like that. If you think that way, you’ll be—it’ll wear you down, and they’ll be no end to it. Of course, there is a final draft—only because there has to be, because the job demands it of us. Were it my own decision, there wouldn’t be any final draft—instead, it’d be some ongoing perpetual process. So maybe that’s why I keep the blue cabinet—*my own* perpetual process. And I really suggest that you try to think the same way—that, because they ask us to, we always give them a final definition—but, for us, that final definition is

just a part of the process, informing the next definition.

“Because all words are connected—you know that. So, they ask us to take words out of context, to pluck them from the air—and, because they ask us to, we do it for them. But, really, we know that it’s just for them—that, for us, those words are just part of an ongoing conversation. If I define the word *choice* for them, I know that, in my own conversation I will also define *liberty* and *restriction* and *will*, *consciousness*, *time*, *humankind*, *society*—and on and on. Because how can the word

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*choice* or *welfare* possibly be defined on its own?

“After a while, maybe a year or two working here, if you’re like me, you’ll learn to appreciate the difference between *The Code* and *Stat.* and *Code 2*. Because, in a way, that difference is the difference between dead words and living words—the positive and the negative— words outside of context, and words within the stream of language.

“*Code 2* is usually about specialization. Instead of asking what *energy* means, *Code 2* will ask: ‘What does the word

*energy* mean within the specific context of nuclear power?’ Now, for the purposes of our job, we’ll have to define both—*energy* within and outside of context—but, what we do is, we’ll have a meeting with nuclear lobbyists and anti-nuclear lobbyists and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and we’ll all be sitting there talking about the meaning of the word *nuclear energy*.

“With *The Code* and *Stat.*, though, it’s just us sitting around with documents doing research. So you—you’ll, over time, you’ll probably come to prefer one over the other—or maybe’ll you go back and forth.”

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“So—but what is it we do, really?  
What is our job?”

“Our job? We—we’re ghosts,  
really—ghost writers—that’s what we do.  
Shadows on the wall—the cave—of  
Congress.”

“What does Mrs. Rong do?”

“Ro—she—she spends all her  
days dealing with lawyerly-lawyers. Why do  
you ask?”

“No reason.”

Sitting back, I saw Ximena crossing Adams Mill, coming down 18<sup>th</sup>. I waved her away, Jessie still looking at her plate.

Behind Jessie, Ximena crossed into a bookstore, waving to me. I smiled.

“I thought—aren’t you— isn’t everyone working with us a lawyer?”

“Yeah—yes, we’re all lawyers—that was confusing, what I was saying—but we’re different kinds of lawyers, with different outlooks. Rong—Ms. Rong is a—what I call a *pure lawyer*—she lives entirely in the world of law—an academic lawyer—the kind of lawyer that often ends up on the

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Supreme Court, or somewhere like that.

Mal—Mr. Phillips—he’s a *political lawyer*.

And I’m sort of a mix of both—a

*philosophical lawyer*—the kind that deals with the language of law. So—so, of course there’s overlap—that’s why we work in the same office—why we have weekly meetings, eat lunch together. But, still—we’re different from each other—we have different ways of seeing things.”

“I wonder what kind of lawyer I am.”

“And—well, in a lot of ways, it’s also shaped by who we see each day, who we

deal with. We all deal with Congress, but beyond that—Mr. Phillips deals with lobbyists, Ms. Rong deals with lawyers and judges, and I—you and I—deal with administrative agencies and historians—the CRS. You could—well, I sometimes use a test to tell—a two-step test. It's not perfect, but it's a good starting point. In a way, it's a kind of game. Alright?"

Drinking, she nods.

The waiter comes, and I ask for the check.

"Ok, so—the first step: let's say that a—a man, let's say, named—John Dupont, is visiting relatives in France.



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Dupont—oh, by the way, Dupont is a US Citizen, ok? Alright, so Dupont goes out with his cousins, gets drunk, and goes back to his hotel to sleep things off—for whatever reason, he can't stay at his cousins' place—they don't have enough room because they're remodeling—whatever, it doesn't matter.

“The next morning, Dupont is woken up by the police breaking into his apartment, arresting him for murder. They haul him off to jail, and when he gets there he sees his cousin, Jacques. When John enters the cell, he sees what he thinks is a

spot of red on Jacques's palms. Jacques is a French citizen.

“What happened, Jacques?’ he asks.

“I don't know!’ says Jacques.  
‘They arrested me for murder!’

“The police take John and Jacques to separate cells and they offer them each a separate deal. For Jacques: if he says that John did it, then he only gets five years in prison. For John: if he says that Jacques did it, then he will be extradited to the US, and they will deal with him there. For both: if they keep silent, or say that nobody is guilty,

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then they will get the maximum sentence, at least twenty-five years.

“Jacques stays silent. John tells the police, ‘I think Jacques did it. I saw blood on his hands.’ The police examine Jacques and find no blood, but they agree to send John back to the US, thus keeping their part of the bargain. Once home in the US, though, John is sent free. Jacques, after a trial lacking conclusive evidence, is sent to prison for five years.

“You with me so far?”

“Yes.”

“Alright—so, in reality, John was the murderer. Jacques is innocent. After the cousins went home, John returned to a club, grabbing a prostitute and pulling her into an alley, stabbing her to death. He then went to the hotel and washed up, drinking himself to sleep.

“So—the question, the test, is this: *has justice been served?*”

Asking the question, I watched her closely, looking for an intimation.

Looking at the windows of the restaurant, she asked, “Does anyone ever find

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out the truth? Does anyone ever find out that John did it?”

“No,” I said, flat.

“So—so what’s the right answer?” she asked, looking at me.

“There is no right answer. That’s why it’s an ink blot. You revealed something about yourself by your own answer.”

“What did I reveal?”

“Well, first of all, you revealed that you’re a lawyer. For a lawyer, the correct answer is always a question. For most people who aren’t lawyers, there’s no question that justice hasn’t been served. So,

without thinking, the average person will say something like—*No, justice has not been served until John is punished.*”

“Have you given other people this test?”

“Yes—Mr. Phillips answered by asking, ‘Were France and the US both satisfied?’ Ms. Rong answered by asking, ‘Was everything done according to the law?’ And my own answer has been to ask, ‘How do you define *justice*?’”

“So you each asked a question.”

“Exactly—it’s like the saying, ‘How does a lawyer answer a question? By asking, *Can you clarify that?* Even if there’s

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nothing further to be clarified, asking for clarification flips things around on the original questioner. Lawyers don't like to give answers—they like to ask questions. And asking a question also gives you time to think.”

## 34.9

The waiter comes; I pay. Behind Jessie, I see Ximena emerging with books, walking across to sit in the brick park.

“So what is step two of the test?” asks Jessie.

“Step two,” I say, looking at her, “is shorter: imagine that Congress, along with the President, worked to create a new administrative agency. The name of the agency is the Climate Science Administration, the CSA. From the start, it is clear the jurisdiction of the CSA will overlap other agencies, including NOAA, the DOE, and the EPA. How is, or should, this overlap be resolved?”

Again, she takes a moment to think, looking through the windows at the restaurant interior. Following her eyes, I see couples waiting to sit, and—standing—I ask, “Should we go?”



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She nods, rising, grabbing her things.

“Can they resolve the overlap,” she asks, “before the agency is formed? When they write the act stating the agency’s role?”

“They could,” I said, “but they purposely did not.”

“Why would they do that?” she asks.

We are walking now, crossing 18<sup>th</sup> Street. We pass Ximena smiling at me then lowering her head to look in her book.

“What did the others say?” she asked.

“We all said the same thing—*it won't be resolved*. This question doesn't work as well,” I said, hailing her a cab. “We all know from experience that agency overlap is never really resolved, even though that's supposed to be part of our job, what we do in our office. In an ideal world, it's something that we might fix, but, in practice, it's always left to the agencies themselves. And the rule of thumb for agencies is that they like to do the least amount of work possible.

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“The longer you work in our office, the more you’ll see how common it is to have inter-agency overlaps and inter-agency gaps. We’ll point them out, but they’re usually unchangeable. Most of the time, they’re done on purpose, so that the agencies and lobbyists can argue over the discrepancies. Or not argue over them. A few cases have gone to the Supreme Court, but they usually are wishy-washy about the whole thing—what they call *deference*. I’m sure you studied a few in law school, right?”

She nodded.

“The language of legislation,” I said, continuing to lecture, “is often intentionally broad or generalized, ambiguous—so that agencies can interpret things the way they like. But ambiguity is also just an unavoidable byproduct of language. Language itself is inherently vague.”

Looking unsure, she bends her head—from the look on her face (or rather, the absence of a look), I can see that she disagrees. But I decide to leave the discussion until later, within the context of an actual example from work, when it will be more easily broached.

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A cab stopped, and I opened the door. As Jessie stepped in, I saw on her face a wan look of disillusionment.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Goodnight—I enjoyed our talk,” I said, closing the door.

The cab drove away, down Columbia. After watching it glide over the hill, I went over to Ximena, sitting reading a book on organizing activism using the internet.

## 35.1

My grandmother was a religious woman; by the time I was old enough to remember, my mom had given up on God. I put it that way (“given up”), because she still believed in God—it was just that she didn’t

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really like him very much. Almost as if he were an old relative that let her down or angered her—someone she still loved, but with whom she was too disappointed to meet or call on the phone.

So I never went to church or anything like that. I remember my grandmother, sometimes my grandfather, getting dressed in nice clothes, carrying bags, books, walking to the car.

“Can I come?” I asked my grandmother once, making sure that my mother could hear.

Over my head, my grandmother  
gave my mother a look.

Silence.

The matter was settled.

## 35.2

Wind bounces branches.

Mornings, for a month or so, I go to work early, so that I may stand in my office alone, watching the trees lose leaves. Most the week is spent with Congressional aides, legislative staffers with whom I am working on what has recently been baptized the Prison Reorganization and Correctional Transition and Integration into Community



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Environments (PRACTICE) Act. Stupidly, I decide to have a few of them into the office at once, aiming to save time.

“The word *integration* is troubling,” says one staffer, rotating his wrist, “almost with the overtones of Civil Rights—that sort of thing. As if we were integrating different races or something like that.”

“You can’t change the title,” says another staffer—number 2.

“No way!” says number 3, “it took long enough to come up with that title as it is!”

“But *integration*—” begins 1.

“Shmintegration,” says 2.

The main aim of the act is to lower non-violent prison sentences whilst also giving aid to those communities willing to create what the bill calls “community transitional environments.” *Community transitional environments* (CTE) include things such as job training centers, group clinics, weekly/monthly community meetings, business hiring incentives, etc.

“My Congressman,” says 3, “is worried that CTEs will end up being seen negatively—or at least labeled that way. She’s worried that we’re going to have these

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communities that get a bad name, almost as if they're seen as prisons themselves."

"There already exist communities," says 2, "that are more accommodating to ex-convicts, just—"

"No, no," I say, already weary, "you need to get out of the habit of using that term. It's not *ex-convicts* anymore, because that defines who they are in terms of their prison experiences. In PRACTICE, we're calling them *re-integrators*, or *re-ints*."

"But that's such an awkward sounding word," says 1.

“Of course it is,” I say, “because we just made it up. Words always sound weird when you first invent them. But, after a while, people will get used to it. Or, if they don’t like it, they’ll naturally come up with something else. We just didn’t like the sound of *rehab*s or *rebirth*s, because both already have their own connotations, what with rehabilitation clinics and reborn religious groups. We needed to create new connotations for a new group of people.”

“But, as I was saying,” says 2, “some communities are already more accommodating to ex—*to re-integrators*—I mean, all you have to do is look at a crime-

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map, and you can see where all of the child abuse offenders live—they always end up in the same neighborhoods.”

“Whether or not it already happens naturally,” says 3, “the purpose of this legislation is to make people aware of it and comfortable with it. So that it’s not hidden. To get the community involved in making the decisions about where these people end up living.”

“You mean to pay them off,” says 1.

“Whatever you want to call it,” says 3, “if they’re living in those types of

communities now, it's because they either don't know about the ex-cons—I mean, *re-integrators*, or they can't afford to live anywhere else. With PRACTICE—”

“Alright,” I say, gesturing to make them attend, “everyone hold on—just hold on. The purpose of meetings like this is not to debate policy. If you want to do that, do it somewhere else. The purpose of being here is simply to write the legislation. And, more specifically, your purpose in meeting with me is to parse definitions. I understand that some debate is a by-product of defining terms, but we need to cut back on that as much as possible.”

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They sit quiet, abashed—reprimanded. Usually, I have only one Congressional staffer into my office at a time—at most, two—but PRACTICE is one of those bills with which everyone, it seems, wants to be involved. Regretting my decision, I remind myself to return to my previous policy.

“So,” I say to them, “let’s get back to defining words. We will no longer be using the term *parole officer*; instead, it will be *community integration counselor*, or maybe *community integration guide*, either

CIC or CIG for short. Which one do you think works better? Give me some suggestions...”

### 35.3

Evolutionary science, at least the kind that I studied, does not really concern itself with the origin of life. Sure, there are scientists who look at abiogenesis, paleobiology, that sort of thing—but they are few and far between. Mostly, it’s just chemists and physicists who study all that. And, anyway, none of those questions ever really interested me, because, ultimately, they seemed unanswerable. It’s not that I was



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only interested in questions with definite answers (as if there were such a thing), but, for some reason, when it came to questions like *the origins of life*, I was never really convinced that chemists in a lab with lightning in a bottle were actually getting anywhere.

What always made me curious, more than anything else, was phenotypic variation and plasticity—the diversity among individuals within the same species, or subspecies, in regard to appearance and behavior. *Why do different individuals*

*within the same species have different physical characteristics?*

## 35.4

A Tuesday after lunch, I head up Foggy Bottom, asked to visit the Administrative Conference of the US (ACUS). I beg Rong to come along. We meet with a group of lawyers from various administrative agencies, asking us for suggestions on improving the process for writing *Code 2*.

“What we’re really interested in,” says a large bearded man showing bright

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teeth, “is making administrative rulemaking a completely public process on the internet.”

“How would you do that?” asks Rong.

“Simple,” says a woman in green, “we make it just like any online article or forum—a place where people can comment and offer opinions.”

“Would people have to submit their real names?” I ask. “Or could they use a screen name?”

“Moot,” says the bearded man, waving his hand.

Rong is getting angry. “Have you ever read an online forum or comments to—to *anything*? A news article? Most of the stuff is tangential at best. At worst, it’s just curse words and paranoia. If you have online citizens—and how would you even know if they’re citizens? Would they have to offer social security numbers or something like that? Or could someone from China or Sweden comment?”

“Those sort of details are—you’re getting caught up in insignificant details—semantics,” says the woman in green.

“You just defined our job,” I say.

Rong smiles.

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We talk to them (listen, really) for what ends up being four or five hours. By the time we're finished, we realize that the day is over. Leaving the building, we begin walking on K Street, toward Farragut.

"They just wanted us up there to pat them on the back," says Rong.

"Yeah—but I'm not so sure," I say, "I think they might have something more definite in mind."

The day next, I meet with the chief legislative officer of the DOJ, along with a subordinate staffer from the Federal Bureau of Prisons. We discuss the writing of *Code 2* for the upcoming PRACTICE Act.

“Let me ask you something, Tom,” I say to the DOJ, “what do you think about putting rulemaking on the internet?”

“On the internet? How?”

“As a—for instance, a forum with feedback—with, you know, a place where people could comment.”

“What people?”

“Well—*The People*,” I say, grinning.

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He looks horrified, looking at the BOP staffer—even turning around to see if Rong is listening. She is looking at her phone, talking to her assistant—but I can see that she’s perked up.

Tom leans forward, across my desk—almost as if he is about to grab my lapels.

*“Are you crazy?”*

I chuckle.

“Just thinking out loud,” I say.

“Well *don’t*,” he says, leaning back, sighing, “don’t mention that to anyone, I mean—I mean, just think of—of all the

dipshits out there—those crazy internet wackos—can you imagine all the bullshit we'd have to deal with? Why would you, of all people, want that? We'd have to hire thirty people just to deal with those crazies!"

I call through to Kelly, asking her to bring us something to drink.

"I was just thinking out loud, Tom."

He shakes his head, eyeing me warily.

"Yeah," he says, watching Kelly as she brings in bottles of water, "but I know the way you think out loud."



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I take a bottle of water and drink;  
Tom and the BOP follow suit.

“But even if it did happen, you’d  
just ignore them, wouldn’t you?”

He moves to talk, but I interrupt,  
saying, “Nevermind—I think I know the  
non-answer to that. Let’s change the  
subject.”

“We need,” I continue, quickly  
transitioning, “to come up with a new term  
for *parole officers*. Something like  
*community integration guides*, or CIGs...”

BOP leans forward.

## 35.6

On the island, visiting my mother during a break, I soon found that she'd returned to religion. She didn't say anything about it; it was, rather, her praying to herself, the new symbols hung around the house, the Bible conspicuously resting in the living room.

We sat down for dinner—spaghetti, bread, broccoli. And, for the first time in my life, I saw her bow her head, folding fingers, murmuring; then looking up, smiling.

“I'm hungry!” she said.

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*Waiting, I thought, for me to say something—to ask about it.*

Instead, I acted as if it were all perfectly normal.

When she went out the next day, buying groceries, checking the post office, I walked straight into the living room, grabbing the Bible and sitting on the couch. The night previous, before dozing off, I realized that I'd never really looked at the book. Ages ago, I'd seen my grandmother's old leather copy, the cover laced with scrolls and filigrees, but I was always too scared to

open the thing, afraid of what Mom might do if she caught me. Later, in high school, through college, I'd simply had no interest. From my point of view, the Bible was just like any other novel that one was *supposed to read*, and I never very much liked those kinds of novels. The only fiction I read, mostly, was detective fiction— and I'd stopped reading that in middle school. It'd been non-fiction ever since. So, sitting there, on the island, on the couch, opening the front cover, I felt as if I were opening a black box.

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Days in, days out, meeting with Congressional staffers, administrative agency staffers, lobbyists, lawyers from the LRC, researchers from the CRS, I develop rough draft definitions.

*Community transitional environment (CTE)—a community designed with the purpose of providing an accommodating atmosphere for persons leaving prison. CTEs are not designed in the sense that they are “planned” (as in the case of Levittowns). Rather, CTEs are designed after the fact. A*

*CTE is formed when the community forms an agreement with the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In exchange for becoming a CTE, the community receives various types of funding.*

*CTEs are required to have:*

*1) No less than one psychiatric facility*

*2) Business incentives for hiring re-ints (see definition in section 245b)*

*3) CTE housing (see definition in section 246)*

*4) Monthly CTE meetings no less than once a month*

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*5) Job training facility*

*...*

*Re-integrator (Re-int)—an individual transitioning from a prison to a CTE.*

*In exchange for early release, re-ints agree to a number of provisions, the specifics of which will be established on a case-by-case basis, in coordination with the organizing council of the local CTE (see definition of “organizing council” in section 251f).*

*All re-ints will agree to at least the following:*

*1) Group counseling (periodicity determined on a case-by-case basis)*

*2) CTE housing*

*3) Enrollment in CTE work or job-training program.*

*4) Attendance of weekly visits with community integration guide (see definition in section 254g)*

*5) Attendance of monthly CTE meetings*

*...*



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*Community integration guide (CIG)—an individual guiding re-integrators within the CTE. CIGs act as liaisons between re-ints and CTEs. The primary purpose of a CIG is to help re-ints transition from prison to community life. CIGs typically will require training in both criminal justice and counseling. CIGs meet regularly with re-ints, assisting them in communicating with other members of the CTE. A CIG is specifically not a parole*

*officer, and differs from that position  
in many ways, including...*

...

## 35.8

Coming back to law school, after visiting my mother, I purchased a Bible of my own—what looked like an academic reference text (complete with footnotes). What interested me most were the laws—Leviticus especially. Notepad on my lap, pen in hand, I began writing down words to define.

“offerings”

“clean and unclean”

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“purity”

“idol”

“nakedness”

“uncover”

“lie carnally”

“deal falsely”

“talebearer”

“enchantment”

“observe times”

The list of words went on for some ten pages or so, even before I began fleshing out definitions. Working slowly, I moved to assign both an historical and

contemporary meaning to each word. This rough drafting process took some two weeks. By the end, I was left feeling both unsatisfied and amateurish, a dilettante playing with an age-old art. The idea of historical-to-contemporary interpretation and translation bothered me, to say the least.

At the time, I was spending all of my days studying administrative case law; so, perhaps it was inevitable that I would draw a parallel between the Bible and the Constitution. Leviticus was *The Code* of the Bible. Sitting there in my apartment on L Street, looking over my amateurish scrawling, I began to see the hermeneutics of

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the Bible as parallel to administrative interpretation of legislation. Congress, in this analogy, consisted of minor gods, demiurges creating what, in the end, were only words, so much smoke (*In the beginning was the word and the word was with...*). Administrative agencies, then, were kinds of priests, transforming the smoke into solid actions, controlling the meanings of those words and, in turn, using those meanings to regulate the citizenry.

After most of a year of work, the PRACTICE Act advances through committee, passing bicamerally. The BOP, via the DOJ, publishes their regulations in the *Federal Register*, waiting the required period for comment. They receive a handful of comments, all of which are duly recorded and subsequently ignored.

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## 36.1

Coming home, down the sidewalk to the front entrance, I am talking on the phone with Ms. Peterson, discussing PRACTICE, when I see a shadow moving

toward the edge of the steep hill leading down into Rock Creek Park, stumbling on the leaves and fallen branches.

“I have to go,” I say, hanging up, jogging then running across the street and onto the grass as I see the figure—discerned now as a man holding a cane, looking as if he is about to fall over and roll down the hill, over roots and rocks, down to the park police’s horse stable below.

“Hey!” I yell, but he doesn’t hear me and goes down, onto his back, his cap falling on the ground.

As I get to him, I see that it is Lyon, lying there looking up at me as if I



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were crazy. Breathing heavy, I bend down to him, arm around his shoulders.

“Lyon—are you ok?”

“Of course I’m alright,” he says, angry, brushing off my arm, “who the hell are you?”

A bit taken aback, I say, “I—I’m Fox.”

“I don’t know any Fox—and what kind of name is that, anyway—Indian?”

He stares at me.

He moves to stand, and I help him rise.

“And anyway, I don’t want to eat corn on the cob,” he says. “I never wanted to eat it, but she was always saying I should.”

“Who’s that?” I ask.

We begin walking to the building.

He stops to look at me.

“You—I know you—yes, I remember that now. You lived down the road—down 4<sup>th</sup> Street—or T Street? Near the gate.”

I remain quiet; he gives me an exasperated look.

We come to the entrance, and I opened the door; we go inside.

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## 36.2

“I love your green eyes,” says  
Ximena, leaning into my chest.

My right arm comes around her  
back.

We sit on the couch, her head  
sliding down onto my stomach.

I look out through the window,  
seeing the ashen sky, crepuscular eve.

Soon she is snoring.

I look down at her, seeing her  
short rough-cut hair, her small ears, little  
nose, small face, small shoulders, small torso,  
small legs, small feet, small toes.

As she breathes, her small back rises gently and collapses — rises gently and collapses.

Outside, I hear the passing of sirens, voices, cars, radios.

### 36.3

Moving slowly, we come into Lyon's living room. He walks straight to a leather chair, sitting.

I walk back out into the hallway, calling Marcus on my phone.

“Where?” he asks.

“Just outside the building,” I say, “the hill going down into Rock Creek Park.”

---

“Damn—he’s getting worse. Is he alright?”

“I think so. He’s sitting in his chair now.”

“Alright—can you stay with him for a while?”

“Sure.”

Going out into the living room, I see Lyon looking over rocks—holding them in his hands, moving them around.

“What are those?” I ask, sitting across from him in an old rocking chair.

He shoots me a look. “I don’t know,” he says, handing me the rocks. “Why don’t you tell me?”

I take the rocks, looking them over: one is small and round, the size of a thumbnail—reddish, with bumps of brown; the other is the size of my fist, a trapezoid, layered with sheets of light brown, light gray, light brown, and dark gray.

“Well?” he asks.

I shrug. “I don’t know,” I say.

He shakes his head, looking out the window, saying, “Then what good are you?”

---

## 36.4

A weekend, Ximena is heading down to the Mall for a protest.

“Why don’t you come?” she says.

“I should probably remain objective—my job,” I lie.

“Oh—right,” she says, tying laces.

She is dressed in a black t-shirt with an anarchist symbol, black boots, a green military jacket, and blue jeans.

“What’s it for?” I ask.

“Here,” she says, opening a closet door, pulling out a placard.

“This,” she says, holding up the sign.

*HACKERS = INTERNET FREEDOM  
FIGHTERS*

“Subtle,” I say.

She smiles. “Subtlety is for my day job,” she says.

“But I still don’t know what the rally’s for,” I say. “Internet freedom?”

Putting on her bag, she moves toward the door.



---

“Hackers,” she says. “Some kind of anarchist rally, I guess. I’ll be back by this evening, alright?”

“Alright,” I say.

She opens and closes the door.

## 36.5

Marcus comes bringing a bag of Andy Capp.

“Hey!” he says, handing Lyon the bag, “I brought you a snack.”

Lyon smiles, opening the package, eating the red-orange fries.

“You,” he says, looking at Marcus, “oh, we had some good times, didn’t we?”

“Sure we did,” says Marcus.

Lyon nods, eating.

“You’re from—from—where’re you from?” he asks.

“I’m from DC, Pops.”

“You’re from the District? That’s my home, born and raised. I must’ve seen you around. You from LeDroit?”

“I live in upper Northeast now, Pops. Remember my street? The one with the ballfield?”

---

“Oh—alright, alright,” says Lyon, looking out the window. “I thought you were from LeDroit.”

Suddenly, he turns on me, asking, “What about you?”

Marcus stands, walking into the other room.

“I live right below you,” I say.

“Hmm—alright,” he says, eating. “Where’s that?”

“Adams Morgan,” I say.

He screws up his face.

“It’s dirty over there,” he says.

Marcus returns, carrying a chessboard, pieces.

He bends over to Lyon.

“Let’s play some chess, alright?”

“Alright,” says Lyon, dropping the bag of fries, “you don’t have to yell.”

Marcus picks up the bag, handing it to me; then slides over a small table, setting up the board, the black and white pieces.

## **36.6**

“Your move,” says Marcus.

---

Again, Lyon is looking out the window. He slowly moves his head, looking at us—then down at the board.

“Huh?” he asks.

“It’s your move.”

He stares at the pieces.

“Why don’t you tell us something about geology?” asks Marcus.

Lyon continues staring at the board.

“What about,” I say, looking around the room—seeing, on the shelf, a book titled *Orogenies and Oceans*, “what about orogeny —what is that?”

Lyon looks up at me.

“They all want to talk about mountains,” he says. “About rocks. ‘*But what about water and ice?*’ I asked them.”

He sits silent, moving a pawn.

“What did they say?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he said. “They don’t want to talk about water and ice. They only talk about—about mountain building and—and all that.”

He looks at Marcus.

“Your move,” he says.

Marcus moves a bishop.

---

Ximena asks me to go out with her friends.

“I don’t like your friends,” I say.

“Not those friends—you haven’t met these ones yet,” she says.

Grudgingly, I agree.

We ride down near 14<sup>th</sup> Street, some fusion restaurant. When I see where we’re heading, I laugh to myself.

“What?” she asks.

“Nothing—this is—this guy I work with calls this area *The Meld*.”

She bends her brows. “I thought everyone called it that.”

“What?”

“Everyone I know, at least.”

Her friends come over and  
introduce themselves.

We sit and eat and drink and  
talk.

“The corn subsidy is killing us,”  
says Lucia.

“And those damn GMO  
corporations,” says Celia, “making all hybrid  
engineered foods.”

“What really bothers me,” says  
Derek, “is the manipulation of advertising...”



---

They talk like this through  
evening into night. I try not to nod off.

Ximena takes my arm as we step  
down into the metro.

“You had fun, right?” she asks.

“They seem nice,” I say, thinking,  
*I felt like I was at work.*

## 36.8

“We’re almost at that point,” says  
Marcus, “putting him in a home—a care  
facility.”

We are standing in the hallway outside Lyon's condo. Marcus has decided to stay the night with his father.

"Sometimes," I say, "I feel like he's right there—just behind the curtains. Like, if we just keep pressing, he'll come through and push away all those cobwebs."

Marcus nods.

"I need a smoke—you mind?"

We head outside.

"Problem is," he says, lighting the cigarette, "he's getting to be a danger to himself. Where was it?"

"Over there," I say, pointing into the night.

---

Away from the streetlights, the park looks almost like a forest.

“Shit,” says Marcus.

“It’s more of a gradual hill than I thought. But still—one or two more steps—”

“He could’a killed himself.”

“Or at least broken a hip or something.”

## 36.9

Marcus steps on the butt.

We head inside.

We step onto the elevator,  
pushing the buttons.

The elevator stops, doors  
opening, and I exit.

Marcus nods; I nod.

I walk down the hall to my  
apartment.

I slide in the key. I open and  
close the door.

I walk over to the bed and fall  
asleep.

---

**37.1**

2:29 on the clock when the phone  
wakes me.

“Hello?”

“Fox—it’s Syd. Hey, I need your help, ok? I need you to come down here, I’m down in Logan—you gotta come down, ok?”

“What?”

“Fox—*just come down, alright?* I’m in shit—just come down to—where are you taking me? Huh? Ok—Fox, come down to V Street—V as in vagina—and 17<sup>th</sup> Street—as in the number 17, ok? Fox—ok?”

“Ok.”

Hanging up, I try and fail to remember hearing the phone ring.

---

The police station is a long brick-and-glass building, metal and blue paint, looking like a school built in the 1960s.

Mally is sitting waiting in the lobby.

Knees and elbows together, looking at the tile floor.

“Fox!” he says seeing me, standing walking across the hall.

His hair is red scattered straw, clothes rumpled.

“What the hell...”

“Fox—let’s get out of here.”

“You can go?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, pushing me out the door; then, on the steps outside saying, “I gotta go to court tomorrow—can you drive me?”

“What the hell...”

We ride back to his condo.

### **37.3**

“I was stupid,” he says, walking out from the bathroom.

I am sitting on his couch,  
wondering what I am doing there.

I am tired.



---

“I was out—at a club, with friends,” he walks into the kitchen, “you want anything to drink?”

“Coffee.”

“Alright,” he says, opening cabinets, the refrigerator; then coming out and sitting.

Soon, I hear the sound of coffee brewing.

“Out with friends,” he says, coming to the living room, “you know one of them, Dean, from the commerce lobby—and Aaron came in—he’s the guy who used to work with us, before you came along, and

without even thinking about it, I went over to him and punched him in his fat eyebrow—and the police came and hauled me off—he's pressing charges."

"Why'd you do that?"

He grabs his hand.

"My hand fucking hurts," he says.

## 37.4

He brings mugs, two.

"Why'd you do it?" I ask again,  
taking my mug, drinking.

"Why'd I call you?"

"That, too."

He looks into his mug.

---

“Fox—the short of it is that you’re the only person in this city I trust. I think you’ll understand what I mean someday, but until then, you’ll just have to take my word for it. As for why I hit the bitch, I can’t tell you, and if I could, it’d be too boring anyway.”

“But you have to go to court tomorrow.”

“As things stand now—yes.”

We drink our coffees.

He rubs his knuckles, fingers,  
palm.

“Fox,” he says, after a while, still looking at his hand, “I owe you. I won’t forget it.”

## 37.5

Supplicant, Mally asks me to stay on the couch; I agree. But I have coffee in me, my ankles hanging over the end of the arm, in a strange environment, so I can’t sleep. I begin pacing around the place—then, worried that I might wake him, put on shoes and coat and head out into the street.

*I don’t really know this neighborhood*, I think, stepping out down the sidewalk. It has the feel of a DC street—

---

rowhouses with turrets, brick painted red, white, brown; sidewalks with trees along the edges, overhanging parked cars; little lawns the size of a single sedan; yet something feels strange to me—un-homelike.

*It's empty—that's it!*

Even past two, three, in my own neighborhood, there is always some lone figure or group of people walking around. Or Lyon sitting out front, insomniac. And in Ximena's neighborhood, kids are out talking and laughing all night long. But here, in *The Meld*, the streets, the sidewalks, the stores are all empty. The houses, too, are quiet—

darkened. Not even the sounds of sirens.  
Smooth silence slides eerie over my back—I  
grow uncomfortable and walk quick back the  
street, up into the rowhouse.

## 37.6

Inside, Mally is awake, dressed—  
his comportment changed.

“I thought you’d left,” he says,  
looking me up and down.

“I needed to take a walk,” I say.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

“No.”

---

For a moment, his face is dark; then instantly he is the old Mally, summer sunshine in a field of flowers on a hillside...

“Come on, Mr. Gray,” he says, grabbing my elbow, leading me to the door, “let’s get you some breakfast.”

“What time is court?”

“No court,” he says, locking the door behind us, “everything’s settled.”

“Settled?”

“Yes,” he says, looking around the street as we step outside.

It then dawns on me that, in the span of some five minutes, the sun has risen.

The street is already bustling.

Nearby, I hear the sound of an engine starting, a woman walking her dog.

“Now,” says Mally, all smiles, a brass band, “what would you like to eat?”

### 37.7

Mally never again mentions *the incident* (as I melodramatically mentally refer to that night). The few times I move to broach the subject, he cuts me off, perhaps reading my thoughts through my face—always saying something like, “You’re a good man, Mr. Gray. I will always be in your debt”; which pronouncement always leads to



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an awkward pause of twenty seconds or so; so, I soon learn to pretend to forget the whole thing.

## 37.8

A few weeks later, I am alone in my office when Mally comes in.

It is after seven in the evening, and everyone has gone home.

He stands at the window for a moment, as if preparing his thoughts—then turns and sits across from my desk.

“Next week,” he says, noncommittal, “I’ll announce my resignation.

Then I'll stay on for a while—at least two weeks, probably a month, and I'll go to work for CPV Associates, up near metro center.”

“Why? Because of—”

“Money,” he says, cutting me short—then grinning.

I sit back for a moment, absorbing the news, looking around the room, toward the windows.

Outside, it is dark.

“What about—about participatory democracy, or whatever it was you called it. *Active citizens*.”

“*Exactly!*” he says, thumbing towards me. “That’s exactly the point! Sure,

---

I'll be making more money, but I'll actually be *more effective* as a lobbyist than—than in this place.”

He waves his arms.

“All this—this damn bureaucracy,” he says, crossing his legs, “you know how it is, Mr. Gray. It cuts against democracy. It’s so damn—what’s the word?—*stultifying*. Lobbying—maybe it’s sad to say, but money is a shortcut to democratic action. That’s just the way things are, and the way things will always be. In a way, being a lobbyist is being a realist—a pragmatist.”

“But you don’t believe in anything.”

He laughs.

“You’re right—I don’t. But I do believe in helping those who believe in something. Which makes me the perfect lobbyist. I don’t have any prejudices—just whoever pays the most.”

“How much money is it?” I ask.

He sits straight—the question startling him—then again laughs it off, recovering.

“Sometimes, you do surprise me, Mr. Gray,” he says, tapping his fingers on his

---

foot, “It’s a lot of money. Roughly three times what I make here.”

I whistle.

“And—and I win both ways.

Over there, I’ll be doing the same exact job I’ve been doing over here—except I’ll be *more* effective, without all the red tape—and I’ll be making *more* money, which will probably make me want to work harder.”

“You have it all worked out,” I say.

He thinks on that for a moment, continuing to tap his shoes.

Then he stands. Looking at the clock, I gather my things.

We walk out of the office, down the hallway to the elevators.

“Yes,” says Mally as the doors close, “I do have it all worked out.”

We ride the elevator down, leaving the building together, each going our separate ways.

---

**38.1**

October end: branches, leaves—  
shadows alongside empty park benches.

Ms. Peterson has asked me to come with her to lunch, bringing a few friends.

As I stand waiting on the sidewalk, outside my building, I see a car pull up and idle.

“Mr. Gray!” says a voice, exiting the long sedan.

Mr. Knox crosses the sidewalk, nearly tripping over a bulbous tree root.

“So good to see you!” he says, using two hands to shake my one.

Leaning against the vehicle is Mr. Shepherd.



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“Mr. Gray!” he says. “So nice to see you again!”

“You remember Mr. Shepherd,” says Mr. Knox, “don’t you?”

I nod, sitting.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

The three beam, exchanging conspiratorial glances.

“We’re going,” says Mr. Shepherd, “to the future.”

We pile into the car, turning onto Pennsylvania Avenue.

Crossing the river on  
Pennsylvania, turning onto Minnesota.

Exiting down a side street, we  
wind down and into a cul-de-sac.

The car parks, and we step out  
severally.

A row of brick buildings  
dilapidated—*projects*.

Mr. Shepherd spreads his arms  
wide, inhaling.

I screw my eyebrows, looking at  
Mr. Knox.

“I don’t get it,” I say.

---

“We wanted to show you,” says Ms. Peterson, “what all your work accomplishes.”

I look around, trying to see what they’re referencing. I see a few children walking along a sidewalk, a dog chained behind a chain-link fence, clothes hanging from a second-story deck.

Looking at Mr. Knox, I shrug.

He points across the street—and there—to the right—I see a signboard sticking out of the grass, white melamine nailed to two two-by-fours standing four feet off the ground, four feet square.

I look at the group, and—  
beaming—they nod. I cross over to and read  
the sign.

*FUTURE SITE OF CTE-1*  
*THIS LOCATION WILL BE THE SITE OF*  
*A*  
*COMMUNITY TRANSITIONAL*  
*ENVIRONMENT*  
*TO BE BUILT BY*  
*RKD CONSTRUCTION CORPORATION*  
*WITH ASSISTANCE OF LOCAL*  
*WORKERS 254-B*

I skim the rest of the text.

---

Alongside the writing is a map of  
CTE-1.

We are standing roughly in the  
center of the map.

### 38.3

Sitting in my room, after school,  
reading through the dictionary.

On my lap, a notepad; in my  
hand, a pencil.

I flip through the pages, making  
notes.

First—*Webster's Third*.

Next—*American Heritage*.

*Johnson's.*

*Random House.*

And, for the sake of  
comparison—the current *Oxford English  
Dictionary.*

Looking up meanings, histories,  
pronunciations.

At first, I choose randomly; then,  
as I get the feel for discrepancies, I begin to  
develop a pattern.

## **38.4**

I always did well in school,  
simply because I knew how to follow the  
rules.

---

No matter how much pedagogical theory they may study, all teachers, methodologically speaking, end up being the same—this, an inevitable result of the bureaucratic structure within which they are forced to work.

“For an A,” they say, “recite X.”

So I repeated X back to them; which is not to say that either I believed or agreed with X.

## 38.5

In law school, the seminar I most loathed was titled: *Voting vs. Referendums*:

*The American Ideal: from pre-1776 into the Internet Age.* The course was taught by a rail-thin man named Nathaniel Symanski. He was the most boring person I have ever met. Professor Symanski would walk around the room, moving in small overlapping ovals, pushing aside desks and chairs, his right arm rigid, bent at a 45-degree angle, while his left arm moved about, waving and pointing.

“Voting is an ideal! But it is not reality!” he would say, again and again.

No matter how vociferous his ranting, he somehow ever always managed to lull the room to sleep.



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Once, when most of the class was fast falling into slumber, he called on a woman in back, nodding off, her head hitting against the chair to her left.

“What do you think, Zooey?” he asked her, pausing his perambulating.

Collecting herself, she sat up—jerking—then quick spat out, “Voting is an ideal.”

The class laughed.

He smiled, pointing his finger, resuming his circumnavigations, circumlocutions.

“You laugh,” he said, “but that is what I wanted you to say. I want you all to have it drummed into your heads!”

So, of course, on my final paper, I began by writing: *Voting is an ideal, but it is not reality*. But, really, I had no understanding of what this phrase meant.

## 38.6

Even in kindergarten, I remember the sudden jolt felt, the moment when the teacher changed back from friend, den-mother, comforter, and became again guardian, instructor, disciplinarian.

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The actual memory is foggy—  
bodies of kids on the floor, rolling around. I  
was wearing my green sweatpants, the ones  
with a duck on the side of the leg. I had a  
deep desire to wear those pants as often as  
possible, and it was only by frightening me  
with tales of disease, or of ducky dying, that  
my mother was able to strip them from me  
for washing. The image of green among red  
and blue, white foam, fumbling in the  
cleaning machine.

My best friend (I forget his name)  
was a boy with flat yellow-white hair, long  
down to his shoulders. He and I would play

a game, hitting each other on the shoulder or knee or stomach. I don't really remember the rules of the game, just that somehow, whoever ended up giving the most punches won. So, there we were, rolling around, bopping each other—when teacher comes over, scowling, pulling us apart.

“Don't do that!” she screamed, horrified.

*We're just having fun!*, I tried to say, but it was too late. I could see already from the look on her face that in her world—the adult world—all punching was inherently bad, wrong, evil. Distinctly, I remember feeling at that moment how stupid

---

she was, blinded by her adult worldview (though, of course, I couldn't form those words, probably thinking something more along the lines of: *Stupidhead!*).

### 38.7

Afterwards, they dropped me off outside the office.

“Such a pleasure, Mr. Gray.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Gray.”

Even through their perfunctory pleasantries, I sensed warmth behind their words.

As if, somehow, in spite of (or perhaps because of?) the kabuki-dance required by our relationship, they yet considered me a friend.

### 38.8

Leaves crackled under shoes—squirrels collecting and cradling acorns, dashing up the trunks of trees. Returning from my trip to the future, I made my way back up the elevator, down the hall, past Jessie, into the room with Rong sitting, conferring with her assistant.

On my desk, Mally was sitting leafing through folders.

---

“Did you have a nice lunch?” he asked.

Without answering, I went and sat, opening my desktop, checking email.

“I feel healthy today,” he said.

“Why’s that?” I asked, glancing over at him.

“Oh, I dunno—maybe because it’s my last day working here.”

“What?” asked Rong.

At once, we stood and exchanged farewells, afterwards going out to drink to wish *bon voyage*.

## 39.1

The weekend, Marcus asks me to help move Lyon.

“It’s a shame,” he says over the phone. “He’s been living here for—30 years or like.”



---

Walking into Lyon's place, I realize that moving means both *packing* and *moving*.

"What're you doing here?" asks Lyon.

He's standing in the kitchen, holding a can of coffee with his thumb and forefinger.

"Didn't Marcus call you?"

"Marcus—my son? What's he want?"

For a moment, I am frozen, wondering if Marcus didn't tell him, or if he

forgot. Either way, I decide, it amounts to the same.

“Can I have some coffee?” I ask, hoping to change the subject.

He eyes me warily, watching as I fully enter, turning to deadbolt the door.

Then, without answering, he finishes making the pot.

## **39.2**

After five minutes or so, Marcus calls saying he'll be late.

“Goddamn DC traffic—I think there's a marathon or protest or some such shit,” he says, hanging up the phone.

---

“Marcus’ll be late,” I say.

“Come on and get your coffee,”  
says Lyon. “I’m not your waiter.”

I go into the kitchen, looking  
through the cabinets, grabbing  
a mug, pouring coffee.

The entire time, Lyon stands next  
to the pot, unmoving, watching me,  
scowling.

“Why are you here?” he asks,  
finally, after I’ve taken my cup, walking and  
sitting in the living room.

He sits across from me, resting  
his mug upon the windowsill.

Again, my mind is stuck, unable to respond.

I drink my coffee.

“You were born halfway between Hattiesburg and New Orleans,” I try.

“Bullshit,” he says, loud, fast. “I was born right here in Washington, DC. Our nation’s capital. Anyone who tells you different is having you on.”

As suddenly as he’d started, he stops.

Again watching me—waiting for me to slip up. Drinking his coffee.

“You went down there,” I say.  
“For geology.”

---

His right eye moves.

“How’d you know that?”

“You told me.”

A minute, two, he stares at me—  
a hawk watching a snake.

### 39.3

Then he begins: “I went down there angry, mad at the world. I worked hard to get out of here, and they sent me to Korea.

“The war comes, and they send me off to Parris Island, put me in the 7<sup>th</sup> Marines.

“We’re sent off Korea—landing at Inchon, walking through the heat from Kaesong.

“Landing at Wonsan, chasing the North Koreans to the snow-covered earth.

“Climbing into the mountains.

“So, any time we had away from battle, I’m there, picking at the rocks with hammers, spikes. Because we thought we were just finishing them off.

“Surrounded by the mountains.

“And by the enemy. Suddenly, the Chinese are coming down in waves, blowing horns, yelling. Changjin—Chosin. Where did they come from?

---

“Hell.

“But—but forget all that. We made it out—to Koto-ri. Hungnam.

“I come back to study for my Ph.D, to Philadelphia, another fall-line city—I thought I could at least study the Appalachians. I get there, and no one even knows that there was a war on in Korea. *Korea?* they say to me, *what were you doing over there?*

“But that’s how it was. No one knew what we were doing over there, and I was too tired and angry to tell them.

“So, I turn myself inside out. I do my schooling, and here they want to send me down to swamp country. Down South. Studying geology in the bayou.

“I was angry. I already had pictures of mountains in my mind—Yudamni.

“But when I went down there, I didn’t have time to do any geology anyway. Not until later, after it was all over. And, by that time, my mind had opened up, and I learned to see the things in the Delta. And geology back then was young, so I had plenty to do, and I could do pretty much what I wanted.



---

“But I didn’t have time for it at first.

“All I had was my anger.

“I went down there, and right away I saw that it was different. In LeDroit, we had a separate world, a place away from it. We knew it, but it was only here and there. And in Philadelphia—but down there...

“They sent me down to survey. So, I went out in the field one day, in the middle of nowhere, and I was raised in the city, so I didn’t know the country. But they were all country folk down there.

“I’m down there, and these women are saying they want to be represented, they want to vote. *I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired*, she said, and they shot at her, just because she wanted to vote.

“And it’s all over town, making people angry. They don’t want to let these black Christian women vote. So all a sudden, I’m caught up in this. I’m angry. *What the hell*, I’m thinking, *I just got back from goddamn Korea*.

“So, I go in, and they sign me up, and they say, *You need to go out and register these people to vote*.

---

“I didn’t know what I was doing. I was just angry, seeing what they did to that woman.

“So, I go out to survey the land, and when I see black folk and creoles, I say to them, ‘Look, why don’t you come in and sign a registration form, so that we can get you representation.’ And some of them would come in and sign it, and others wouldn’t. See—before they came in, most of them, we had to teach them a little—because, back then, to get registered, you had to pass a special test.

“These folk, you understand, they were farmers. They couldn’t read nor write. They’d been Jim Crowed all their lives. And when I went out there, talking with them, at first I didn’t even understand what they were saying.

“My mother—I used to imagine my mother going down there, to Hattiesburg, listening to the way they talked—*Ha!* She wouldn’t have it—she wouldn’t even look at them.

“But they looked at me, and they knew what I was saying. And, after a while, I picked up on what the way they talked—what they were telling me.”

---

## 39.4

Marcus comes through the door,  
breaking the spell.

He stands, holding a stack of  
cardboard boxes.

“Who’re you?” asks Lyon.

Marcus looks at me, then back to  
his father.

I walk over to Marcus, helping  
him set down the boxes.

“Marcus,” says Marcus. “I’m  
Marcus.”

Lyon eyes us.

“What are those boxes for?” he asks.

Marcus glances at me; I shrug.

He walks over to Lyon.

“They’re for you,” says Marcus.

“For your things.”

“What things?”

“All your things, Pops. You’re moving, remember?”

Again, Lyon grows quiet.

He looks at Marcus; then moves to speak—then stops, turning to look out the window.

---

Marcus begins packing,  
motioning for me to stay seated.

Every five minutes or so, Lyon  
looks over at Marcus, watching.

Something changes in him.

After a while, he begins  
wandering from room to room—the kitchen,  
the hallway, the bathroom, the bedroom. He  
stands, walks, sits; then stands, walks, sits  
again.

“Yes,” he says, sitting, looking at  
me, “I’ve got to go to bed soon, because I  
have a full day of classes tomorrow, plus a  
departmental meeting in the morning.”

“Where’s that?” I ask.

He looks at me, curious.

“Over at the university, of course.

Where else would it be?”

“Alright,” I say.

He scowls. “Why do you always do that?” he asks. “Why do you always treat me like I’m stupid?”

He shakes his head.

Then he stands and walks around from room to room—the kitchen, the hallway, the bookcase, picking up and moving rocks.

He sits down.

He looks over at Marcus.



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## 39.6

After ten minutes or so, Lyon stands, walking to the closet. He grabs a coat, walking to the door.

“Well,” he says, half-turning, “I’ll see you in the evening.”

“Where’re you going?” I ask.

He scowls.

“I can’t be late! I’ve got a departmental meeting this morning!”

“But it’s Saturday afternoon,” I say, feeling like a jerk.

He looks at me for a moment—  
then nods.

“Alright then—I’ll see you.”

He turns and opens the door,  
walking out into the hall.

I jog into the bedroom. Marcus  
is packing clothes.

“He went out,” I say. “I’m gonna  
go follow him.”

He sighs.

“Alright,” he says. “That’s  
probably better anyhow.”

I turn to go.

“Hey,” he says, “see if you can get  
him something to eat.”

---

“Alright,” I say, looking back.

“And make sure,” he says, his face turning serious, “he’s not walking into traffic—or—you know.”

“Alright,” I say.

Marcus nods, walking back into the clothes closet.

## 39.7

I jog out down the hallway, finding Lyon standing at the elevator.

“This damn thing,” he says, pointing to the doors. “Always takes forever.”

I look and see that the light is off;  
I push the button.

“You have to push the button,” I  
say—again feeling like a jerk.

He shakes his head.

We ride down to the lobby.

Slowly, we walk outside.

Crows crowd naked branches.

They flap; they sit; they caw.

The echoing sounds of cars  
crossing bridges.

“Well,” says Lyon, looking at me,  
“where’re we going?”

I smile.

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“Why don’t we go find a nice quiet place for lunch?”

He nods—waves his hand.

“We’ll go on over here,” he says, walking forward.

“You sure?”

He begins walking.

## 39.8

A few blocks later, we come out a side street, up against a restaurant.

I recognize the place.

“I didn’t know that shortcut,” I say, surprised.

He walks inside, sitting in a  
booth.

I sit across from him.

A waitress comes.

“The usual, Mr. Wade?”

He nods.

I order a cheeseburger, fries.

Lyon looks out the window, onto  
the street.

Cars, cabs, buses, bicyclists.

“Where did all these white people  
come from?” he asks.

I look out the window.

The food comes, and I begin  
eating.

---

When I look up, Lyon is gazing at me—his eyes cloudy.

“My mind,” he says, touching his temple, “I can feel it right here. I know something’s not right. Lately, all I can remember are things that happened a long time ago. Like—like you—I feel like I should know who you are, but I can’t remember your name.

“And this street,” he says, pointing outside, “I know this street in my soul, but I can’t remember the name of it.

“All that keeps coming back to me is my wife.

“The war.

“The earth.”

He looks at me.

We sit silent for a moment.

“My name’s Fox Gray,” I say.

## 39.9

After lunch, entering the building, we see Marcus carrying a box through the lobby.

“Hey,” I say.

He looks over, seeing us.

“Hey,” he says—then jerks up his chin, motioning for me to approach.

I walk over.



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“Mike and Gregg brought a truck over,” he says, “we’re loading it up right now.”

I nod.

“How’s he doing?” he asks.

“He’s lucid,” I say. “He was talking about how frustrating it is not being able to remember everything.”

He nods.

“Good,” he says, “that means he’s here with us for now. Why don’t you sit down here awhile and keep him company—we’re almost done.”

I nod, walking back to Lyon.

We move over to a couch, sitting against the windows.

After an hour or so, Marcus comes over, sweating through his clothes.

“Alright,” he says, “we’re all done.”

He bends down on his haunches, looking at Lyon.

“Alright, Pops. You want to go up and say goodbye to your place?”

Lyon looks at his son squatting.

His fingers are wrapping around the head of his cane.

“I think I’ll take a nap,” he says.

And, slowly, he moves to stand.

---

## 40.1

The simplest and most delimiting way to study evolution is to focus only upon one particular genus or species.

Specialization is, in fact, the name of the

academic game. In my studies, though, I somehow found a way to study inter-species interactions. More specifically, I was interested in human-animal relationships: how humans learn from and benefit from interactions with animals; and how animals learn from and benefit from being with humans; and, of course, studying also those interactions which were *not* beneficial.

So, I began by looking at the evolution of domesticated dogs. Humans are especially skilled at selectively breeding other species (this, the basis of Darwin's great analogy). Across generations, humans weed out those traits that are undesirable. Today,

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we see this process all the way down to genetically-modified organisms; but, really, this practice has been going on since the dawn of human self-consciousness. Most plants and animals that humans interact with have been selectively bred in some way.

Each species has a niche; each species develops a symbiotic relationship with the environment. For a beaver, *environment* means a particular stream—a wooded area, a dam. For humans, the meaning of *environment* is constantly evolving. It is not just the house that becomes a constructed environment, but also

the road, the plowed earth, the fenced land,  
and the animals enclosed within that space.  
For the dog, the human is leader of the pack;  
for the human, the dog is a tool, a living  
breathing technology.

## 40.2

Monday, Kelly calls through.

“A Mr. Phillips,” she says.

“Alright,” I say.

“Hello?” I ask.

“Mr. Gray,” says a voice, “thank  
you for taking my call. I was hoping to meet  
with you today for lunch. It is a matter *most  
urgent.*”

---

“Mally?”

He laughs.

“Yes,” he says, “How ‘bout it—  
you free for lunch?”

“Alright,” I say.

## 40.3

Next, I studied the relationship between humans and chimpanzees. When you spend your time reading research about chimpanzee intelligence, you soon notice that most of this research falls into two broad groups: 1) research conducted “in the wild”, and 2) research conducted in a lab. My

interest was in studying how and why human-raised chimpanzees act (or think) differently than those raised in the wild. So, for instance, I compared Japanese primatologists to Western primatologists, which comparison corresponded, roughly, to a study of social primates versus individual primates.

#### 40.4

M Street and Wisconsin—the heart of Georgetown.

The street is wet.

The cab stops, and I exit. Across Wisconsin, Mally is standing smiling.



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I wait for the light, then cross.  
Shoes slapping against pavement,  
rivulets of rainwater running downhill.  
Chic shops lining the sidewalk.  
“Good to see you,” he says,  
looking smug.  
We walk into the restaurant,  
through a crowd, over to a table.  
A man is sitting; he stands—his  
face familiar.  
He shakes my hand.  
“Mr. Gray,” says Mally, “meet  
Mr. White.”  
We sit.

“Your face looks familiar,” I say.

“Mr. White,” says Mally, “is an actor.”

## 40.5

“Mr. White is interested in helping Africans.”

I nodded.

The waiter had come, and we were awaiting our drinks.

“The conditions over there,” said Mr. White, “are horrible. You can’t imagine it. Just to even—just to get water, or a meal—”

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Here, the waiter interrupted, bringing our drinks.

“Are you ready to order?” he asked, gawking at Mr. White.

We ordered.

“And,” said Mr. White, “there’s a weird sort of racism over there—this racism—”

“Are you sure you mean racism?” ask Mally. “Maybe —ethnocentrism?”

“N—*racism*, yes,” said Mr. White. “*We have to call it racism*. These people—you wouldn’t believe it, they,” he paused, looking at me, leaning, “they use

these—over there, lighter skin, for some reason, is—it's considered more beautiful, so—even these little girls, they use these skin-lightening creams—and they, some of them end up with rashes and—just horrible, they're horribly disfigured, just because of this practice.”

He drinks; we drink.

“But it's even more complicated,” says Mr. White, “because the people in the North have the power—and they happen to be more light-skinned. So, it's usually the people from the South, the ones who are more dark-skinned, who end up using these creams—so, it's—it's almost as if they are

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trying to become Northerners, some of them. But it's also—it's maybe economic, because usually people with lighter skin have more money in that country.

“Although,” he says, leaning back, “who knows really what's behind it. Some people say that they want to be like—to become Westerners. Because of the influence of the media, the images they see—actors on the screen.”

The food came, and we ate our meals.

Humans, generally, tend to think of *homo sapiens sapiens* as *the* social or political species, when in fact, all species fit these designations. All species are both social and political (to be social is to be political). In fact, when we see a lone, or individual, animal or insect, it is usually because a human has placed it in that situation, whether for the moment, or through generations of selective breeding.

Humans isolate other animals (humans also isolate other humans): dogs, horses, cows, pigs, chickens, chimpanzees, lions, sheep...

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Horses are *highly* social. Horses, too, are political, building hierarchies through various forms of communication. It was while studying horses that I fully came to realize and reflect upon how much non-verbal communication (including especially smell, or scent) shapes the social world of all species.

## 40.7

Afterwards, Mr. White shook my hand, walking out through the doors.

Mally followed, ushering the actor into a cab, rolling toward the airport.

By now, it was raining—light mist against the brick sidewalks.

The street was momentarily still. Mid-afternoon, not quite early-evening.

Mally waved another cab, gesturing for me to step in; I did, and he followed.

He gave the driver directions, and we began moving down M Street, toward Pennsylvania.

“He has a movie coming out next week,” said Mally. “So I wanted you to meet him—give you a heads up.”

I sat silent.



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“I said I owe you,” said Mally,  
“and I meant it. So, I’ll be feeding you for a  
while—paying your way.”

I looked at him, and he smiled.

“After all, we’re brothers!” he  
said, laughing.

I looked toward the front.

## 41.1

Wednesday, I held a meeting. The full office was there: Rong and her assistants (she had a group now), Jessie and my other assistants, a handful of lobbyists, and a cobweb of congressional staffers.

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“The next big item,” I said, “will be related to ethnic relations in Northern and Central Africa. It’s not really clear yet where this is headed, but it will be something big and cosmetic—political publicity—involving possibly the Arab League...”

I spoke for some twenty or thirty minutes, covering a variety of subjects. As I talked, I looked around the room, noticing Rong playing with the phone, Jessie struggling not to roll her eyes (playing with her notepad), and both the lobbyists and staffers studiously taking notes.

## 41.2

“But what will we be defining?”

Jessie asked.

We were sitting in my office, alone, reviewing the meeting. Rong and her assistants had gone over to the LRC.

“We’ll begin working on a list tomorrow,” I said, looking at my computer—checking mail.

I looked over at Jessie—she was looking down, her knees pulled together, glum.

I noticed that she was chewing gum, and immediately I began to feel like her principal, her boss.

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*How old is she?* I wondered.

*How old am I?*

“If you like,” I said, “you can begin working through a few words on your own.”

She looked up, curious.

“How would I do that?”

“It’s easy enough. Just ask to meet with one or more of those staffers who were at the meeting today. They love meeting with us, so you wouldn’t have to wait very long. See what they’re considering for upcoming legislation—sound them out.

And write down a few words that seem to pop up over and over again.”

“That’s it?”

I nodded.

“That’s enough for a start,” I said, looking back at my screen, “I’ll be meeting with lobbyists the rest of the week anyway, so why don’t you do that tomorrow and Friday, and we’ll meet up on Monday to see where we are. How’s that sound?”

Agreeing, she scurried from the office, moving down the hall to her closet. As she left, a smell rose to my nose—something I couldn’t quite place.

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## 41.3

Visiting the island during a semester break, my mother surprised me with a gift.

Opening the box—inside, an old camera, a Leica.

“Wow,” I said, “this must’ve been expensive.”

She turned over her hand, resting it across her knee.

“Not too bad,” she said.

I turned it over in my palms, opening and closing the back.

“You’re on an island,” she said,  
“so you have to photograph the ocean,  
alright?”

I held the camera to my eye,  
though there was no film inside, looking at  
her through the viewfinder.

“Photographing the ocean is  
bourgeois,” I said—then smiled.

She laughed.

“Oh, pardon,” she said, bending  
her wrist aristocratically, “how  
unsophisticated of me.”

We both grinned.

“So what are you supposed to  
photograph, then?” she asked.



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I lowered the lens.

“Sight itself,” I said. “Shadows—  
air—ghosts—in-betweeness...”

#### 41.4

On L Street, in my law school apartment, I went looking for the camera, digging through the box packed by my mother, finding inside there instead an old book of *Haunted Folklore*. The book was an ancient tome—musty and frayed. I carried it to the couch, sitting and reading.

*You always did like your  
Grandmother's ghost tales, didn't you?* my

mother had written above the frontispiece. The image on the page was of an old woman sitting by the fire, weaving yarn, a roll of which had fallen onto the floor and was turning into a human hand.

Beginning the first tale, I fast recognized my grandmother's voice.

## 41.5

The more I read, the more I felt as if I already knew the stories—as if they were, in a way, a part of my own history.

I called my mother.

“Thanks for the book,” I said.

“Do you like it?”

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“Yeah—it, something about it seems familiar. Do I know these stories?”

“*You should!*” she said, sounding dumbfounded, “your grandmother told them to you a thousand times since you were a baby.”

“What?”

“Don’t you remember?”

“What do you mean—those tales grandma told us—they weren’t—weren’t they real?”

Laughing, she said, “No, they weren’t real. They were make-believe.”

“That’s not what I meant, I mean—I didn’t mean *were they real*, but—I mean, I always thought that grandma thought they were real—*that kind* of real. *Real to her.*”

“No, they weren’t even real to her. Well, maybe a little bit. Your grandmother does believe in ghosts. But those stories were from that book.”

The phone against my ear, I felt an odd feeling running up my back.

“She stole all those stories? All of them?”

“She didn’t steal them—she just retold them. And, anyway, those stories

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don't belong to anyone—they were just old folktales handed down from one generation to the next. So maybe your grandmother thought of those tales as her own. They were told by her people, anyway. The book was just written by some author who went out and collected them.”

I wasn't ready yet to give in.

“But—but was it all of them?

Were any of them hers?”

Changing the subject, she laughed again.

I reread through the tales, seeing them now as *Just-so stories*, describing my grandmother's cultural history, her social background. These tales were who she was. *So what did that tell me about her?*

In one, a little boy dies and becomes a ghost. He wanders around the countryside, looking for his family. Finally, a little crow stops him.

"What are you looking for?" asks the crow.

"I'm looking for my family," says the boy.

"You won't find them," says the crow, and flies away.

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The boy-ghost walks into a small town, walking into a bakery.

A small cat comes over, rubbing against his leg.

“What are you looking for?” asks the cat.

“I’m hungry, and I’m looking for my family,” says the boy-ghost.

“You won’t find them,” says the cat. “But if you’re hungry, you can eat bialy.”

With that, the cat jumps up onto the counter, grabbing a bialy.

“Here you are,” says the cat, and drops the bialy down into the boy-ghost’s waiting hands.

“Thank you,” says the boy-ghost.

The boy-ghost then walks through the forest, across a lake, coming down a hill, into a large city. He walks down streets, past cars, lights, buildings...

A pigeon sees the ghost-boy and bobs across the sidewalk.

“What are you looking for?” asks the pigeon.

“I’m looking for my family,” says the ghost-boy. “But I don’t think I’ll find them. It’s too big here.”



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The pigeon bobs its head and says, “Come this way.”

And, turning, it begins walking down an alley, turning again, walking down a street, another alley, across a busy intersection, the ghost-boy following behind.

Finally, they come to a tall building.

“Here you are,” says the pigeon, and bobs away.

The ghost walks into the building—and there, he sees his family.

“Mama! Papa!” yells the ghost, running to them.

But they cannot see the ghost,  
and continue about their daily tasks.

The father talks on the phone.

The mother reads the newspaper.

So the ghost walks and sits in the  
corner,

And they stay that way forever,  
the three of them.

## 41.7

Monday, we meet.

Notepad on knee, Jessie is  
brimming out onto the carpet.

“We need to define what these  
ethnic groups are,” she says. “But how do

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we do that? Historically? Because this country is—it's all mixed together."

"Do the people there—how do they, the people that live in the country, distinguish between groups? Do we know?"

"Families—traditions—religions."

"Good," I say, "that's a start. You can define each of those groups."

"But—the main way they define—they distinguish between each other, in everyday life, is by skin color."

"Alright," I say, typing, looking at my screen, "so we'll have to define that, too."

“Define—but how? Define what?  
What would we say? *Skin color?*”

Here, her voice changes.

I look over at her, seeing that she is looking at me uncomfortably—her eyes resolute, yet vibrating, her posture relaxed, yet composed.

“Alright,” I say, looking back at my screen, “I’ll take care of it. Why don’t you begin by defining the religious groups and—and tribes—regional groups.”

“Ok,” she exhales, standing, taking her things, walking back to her closet.

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## 42.1

Marcus wins the first three hands.

“Damn,” says Gregg.

“I need the money,” says Marcus.

“We all need the money,” says Mike, drinking.

“No—I *need* it,” says Marcus, raking coins, dollars. “We’re moving—buying a house.”

Gregg grabs the deck, shuffling.

“Moving where?” he asks.

“Outside Landover,” says Marcus.

“Matter of fact—*way outside*.”

“Movin out?” asks Mike.

Marcus nods.

“Damn right,” he says, “too damn expensive. I can get a place twice the size out there.”

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“Getting too expensive in there,” says Gregg, “that’s why I moved out years ago.”

“No,” says Mike, holding the bottle to his lips, “you moved out ‘cause of your woman.”

We laugh.

## 42.2

I go home tired, slogging between sheets.

Ximena yelps, sitting up straight.  
“What!” she asks.

Looking at me, my head smushed  
against the pillow.

“You scared me,” she says.

“Mm,” I say, closing my eyes.

I doze off—then I am awake,  
Ximena shaking my shoulder.

“C’mon,” she is saying, “let’s go.”

“Go where?”

“There’s a protest I want to go to  
tonight—it’s across the river—Kenilworth.”

“Mm,” I say.

I hear her dressing.

“C’mon,” she says, coming back  
to the bed, “I don’t want to go alone.”



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She pushes my shoulder, rocking the mattress.

I am too tired to argue.

Somehow, sleeping, I manage to get dressed, putting on shoes, a jacket, walking outside. Then we are moving, and I am sleeping in the vehicle, and she pushes my arm.

“We’re here,” she says, and I open my eyes and see a crowd forming.

We begin walking to the center of the crowd, Ximena chanting, raising her fist.

I close my eyes.

## 42.3

After a while, I awake. I am sitting on a concrete curb.

Over there, across the way, is the crowd holding signs and chanting.

Ximena sits down next to me, exhilarated.

“Isn’t it great!” she says.

I smell her sweat.

“Mm,” I say.

“Look at them! This neighborhood is alive!”

“What’s it for?” I ask.

“The new shopping plaza,” she says. “Gentrification.”

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I look out into the crowd,  
suddenly noticing the signs.

***WE DON'T NEED NO GENTRIFICATION!***  
***STOP PUSHING US OUT!***  
***GENTRIFICATION=CLASS WAR!***

Ximena looks at me, beaming.  
“Isn’t it great?” she says, her voice  
loud.

## **42.4**

On the way home, I am fully  
awake.

“*Gentrification*—what is it,  
exactly?”

“It’s whitewashing the city,” she  
says.

“But what is it? How do you  
define it?”

The cab weaves onto 14<sup>th</sup> Street.  
Ximena, turning from the  
window, looks over at me.

“So now you’re awake,” she says.  
I nod.

“It’s rich people,” she says,  
“pushing poor people out of their  
neighborhoods. Neighborhoods they’ve lived  
in for years.”

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“What neighborhoods?”

“Any neighborhood. Places where these people have lived—”

“What people?”

“*Any people*. They’ve lived in these places their whole lives, but now, all of a sudden, the land is—properties are worth more, so rich people come in and buy everything up. And the poor people are forced to move somewhere else.”

“But what neighborhoods are we talking about, specifically? The whole city?”

“All over. All over the city. Every city.”

“Capitol Hill?”

“Probably.”

“Georgetown?”

“Georgetown used to be where  
poor blacks lived.”

“Adams Morgan?”

“Yep.”

“Columbia Heights?”

“Look outside the window.”

The cab stops, and we exit.

We walk down to Park Road.

We walk into the building,  
climbing stairs.

“So,” I say, entering her  
apartment, “you’re part of gentrification.”

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“Yes,” she says, without skipping a beat, “I’ve always been part of the problem. But that’s the choice I’ve made. Sometimes, you have to be part of the problem in order to solve it. Work from the inside.”

## 42.5

Ximena can’t sleep, so we stay up talking.

“Fox—I mean, *don’t you care about anything?* What—what is it you do? Why do you do it?”

“Somebody has to do it.”

“No, don’t you—don’t you want to—I mean, when I think about all the people out there that need help, it just makes me so angry and sad, and frustrated, and—I have to do something, or else I get this feeling in my stomach, like it’s all—and I feel like I’ll go mad.”

“Everyone’s angry,” I say.

Ximena is across the room on a fat chair, her leg over the side; she looks over at me on the bed.

The streetlight shines through the half-open blinds.

“What?” she says, “what d’you mean—what does that mean?”



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“Everyone’s angry,” I say, trying to stay awake, “or at least *passionate*—about something. It’s all I see all day long, each day of the week, day in, day out. That’s what I do. It’s my job to interact with people like that—like you.”

“So?”

“So—everyone has a cause.

*Everyone*—there isn’t a person on the planet that doesn’t have their own cause, whether or not they have the time or money to pursue it. So who gets to say whose cause is more important—the most important? People in Africa need water, food, medication—poor

people are all over the globe, in our own country—in India, in Malaysia, in Yemen—tsunamis crush and kill people, and they need help—hurricanes ravage cities, tearing lives apart—inner-city violence and drugs—global warming destroying the earth—genocide taking place somewhere—in Sudan, in Chechnya—nuclear weapons proliferate—the list goes on and on, but there isn't enough money to go around, so choices have to be made, a hierarchy has to be set up—so who gets to decide? Who makes the choices? Who makes the hierarchy? The UN? The WTO? Congress? The media?"

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Her arms are crossed; she waits for me to continue.

I'm tired.

“*Everyone*,” I say, “makes their own hierarchy—even you, me. Why is our own personal hierarchy better than someone else’s? Ms. Jones is passionate about breast cancer research, and some actor in Hollywood is passionate about Africa, and Mr. Wilson is angry that the government is giving money to fund—who knows what.

“Corporations—whatever that means.

“The entire city—this country is filled with people passionate about their own cause. And each day, I meet with their representatives —their lobbyists, congressional staffers.

“The human mind—human emotions simply can’t care about everything all the time. Or maybe we can care, but we can feel *the same level* of caring for everything. So we develop an emotional hierarchy.

“And we hate ourselves for it, but we have to become desensitized, at least sometimes. Every morning—twenty-four hours now, a new disaster occurs—an

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earthquake, a shooting spree, a housefire—you can't cry, you can't devote emotional or monetary energy to every single cause—so, inevitably, you develop your own hierarchy—you allow yourself to only be emotionally affected in differing degrees by different events.

“But different people's different emotional connections can't match up—so what, then, should determine the hierarchy? If a famous actor wants money to go to AIDs, but a famous CEO wants money to go to poor people in rural New Hampshire, whose opinion should have more weight?”

I wait a beat for her response; she sits silent.

*I'm tired!*

“In other words,” I say, rambling, “I’m saying that without an absolute power deciding things—a god—but no, even with a god—a theocracy—things would end up this way, because god’s will would have to be interpreted, made human—contemporary.

“So what happens is that the loudest voices heard are those with the most power. The ones setting up the hierarchy—the ones doing the interpreting—defining the terms. And *power*, in this sense can mean many different things—money, fame,

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connections. Campaign contributions aren't given for nothing. Lobbyists don't meet for lunch just for the food. I mean—why are you here—why did you—how did you meet Mr. Knox—why did he bring you to meet me? Why did we go out drinking?"

"Why *what?*"

Her voice is blank—I look and see her eyes changed, angry.

"It doesn't matter," I say, wanting to sleep.

"*No*—I came to see you because Zach said I should. He said that you were

someone who cared about my interests—  
*that's all*. I didn't know who you were.”

“But you came.”

“So? I came to meet someone  
who I thought shared my interests.”

“So—so, nothing. You came to  
meet with me, so you knew at least—you  
had an idea about what I do. You had an  
idea about the hierarchy.

“Why do you get involved in  
protests? Why are you a lobbyist?”

“An activist.”

“An activist, sorry. It must—you  
must do those things, because you're not



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satisfied with the hierarchy as it is—or you don't trust it. Do you vote?"

"Of course I vote."

"Why?"

"Because—if you don't, then you don't have a voice."

"So the person you voted for is your voice."

"In a way..."

"If you vote, then why bother going to protests? Isn't your voice enough? Why do you lobby?"

"Voting's *not* enough."

“So you don’t believe in the idea of voting. But you still feel that it’s better than nothing.”

“You know, people in other countries would kill to be having this—*just to be allowed* to have this kind of conversation.”

“But after they kill, what then? After the revolution, what next? Who does the paperwork? Who runs the bureaucracy? Isn’t that what we’re talking about?”

“What—alright, I’ll bite: why don’t *you* vote?”

“Voting doesn’t matter because Congress doesn’t matter.”

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“Wow—you sound just like some of the anarchists I know.”

“Maybe—probably—anarchists would probably be surprised how much they have in common with government employees.”

I roll over in bed, slowly waking.

“But it’s true,” I say, “that Congress is irrelevant. Or, at the very most, just a small slice of the puzzle—if you had a pie chart graphing the influence of how decisions are made—how the hierarchy is determined—then Congress would only be a

very small percentage of the whole, a shadow-puppet.”

“But at least it’s something.

Voting is something.”

“Very little. It’s like a mother telling a child to eat well. When the child goes out for lunch, the actual decision about what she eats will be determined by countless other factors—what restaurants are available, advertising, how much money she has, what she thinks *eat well* means, whether or not she agrees with her mother, her obedience to authority, her emotions, her willpower, how hungry she is, her DNA...”

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“Ok, then—then what—if not Congress, then who does determine it? Who chooses it? The President?”

“Not even the President gets much say—only a very small slice of the pie. The same goes for lobbyists—at least, in the short-term. Lobbyists do have a bigger slice in the long-run. But, in reality, in the day-to-day determinations of the hierarchy, it’s administrative agencies that matter—statutory interpretation, the tide of bureaucracy. And not just the independent agencies. On the face of it—if you just look at what’s written, Congress and the President

have the most say, the biggest pieces of the pie. But, in reality, no matter what Congress or the President may intend, their words can be—are—interpreted in any number of ways. Language is elastic. Words are lived. So, unless we actually vote in every administrative employee, voting is a farce—a shell game.”

Now tired, she comes over to bed.

“Do you really believe all that?”  
she asks, sleepy.

“I don’t need to believe it—I see it firsthand, daily. All you need to do is to look at *The Code* and compare it to *Code 2*.

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Just that alone will show you the difference between legislation and interpretation.”

Awake now, my head on my upturned palm, elbow against the bed, I look over at her now sleeping, half-snoring. *How did she fall asleep so quickly?*

“Exactly,” I said to her, growing angry, “that’s the problem. It’s not exciting—it makes people fall asleep, hearing about regulations and codes and laws and all that. People want loud bangs, yelling, protests, picket-lines and marching, stomping—because they have the appearance

of getting things done. They make people feel better.

“So go ahead and sleep.

“Rest your head on the pillow.

“Dream big dreams.”



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## 43.1

The escalators were broken, so I had to climb up out of the metro. Rain was coming down making the tiles and steps slippery, a state worsened by my smooth-

soled shoes. Coming up onto the sidewalk, my left foot went out, and I came down into a puddle alongside the curb.

A cab passed, spritzing; next, a bus, whooshing.

Standing, I watched the line of workers stepping off the curb, up into the bus.

A man wearing corduroy.

A woman wearing Washington clothes (a black suit, white blouse).

A woman reading a book.

She, looking into her purse.

Without thinking, I stepped into the line—slowly moving forward and onto

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the bus. There was no room to sit, so I stood, my arm grabbing a handle.

She sat in the middle of the bus, reading her book.

## 43.2

The bus made two stops before she exited on the third.

I stepped off, following her down a slight hill.

Left, down another small hill and into a rowhouse jammed between two high glass buildings.

Etched on the door, lettering:  
*ANS Charities.*

I stared at the name for a moment, marking it in my memory, then walked down to the stoplight, waving for a cab, riding to work.

### 43.3

More and more, I feel tired.

At work, an endless stream of phone calls and emails.

“A matter *most urgent*.”

I begin setting up lunches with several of these *most urgent* clients at a time.

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Sitting around a table with a group of them, I don't even bother with introductions; within minutes, each individual's position is clear.

“*Information*,” says Ms. Sandberg, “is the dominant market value.”

Ms. Sandberg, a former DOD employee, works for an internet database.

“Yes,” says Mr. Clifford, “*social information*.”

Mr. Clifford, an ex-Presidential staffer, works for an online social network.

“But information must be conveyed—transported,” says Ms. Segal.

Ms. Segal, a former FCC chairwoman, works for a telecommunications company.

Most lunches, I sit back and let them talk to each other. I begin to pay attention to what I am eating—the food, the wine, the alcohol.

“My god,” I say to the waiter, “this ciabatta is so tangy—so full of holes.”

“Such a tender grape,” I say to the sommelier, “made with such loving care.”

Really, I know nothing about bread and wine; but, for some reason, I find

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talking about it pleasing, a way to pass the time.

## 43.4

A lobbyist, it should be said, has no pride. Each will do anything and everything for the people they represent. The lobbyist's emblem would be an image of two pigs rolling around in shit for pearls. A cynic views individuals as out for themselves only. In my experience, though, it is quite the other way around. These individuals I meet with, dine with, converse with, are always out for others of their kind. They

want to preserve their own particular group's way of life, or way of doing things. They are self-involved, yes, but only insofar as they see themselves as representatives of that group. Self-preservation and group-preservation go hand-in-hand.

## 43.5

Mornings, upon arrival, I flip through the newspapers, cable news in the background.

Neophyte assistants surround me, asking for tasks: Melanie, Ryan.

The two follow me around the office, taking notes, adjusting my schedule.



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“Melanie,” I say, “find out what ANS Charities is, or does.”

“Ryan,” I say, “meet with any waiting congressional staffers —see what they want this week.”

Jessie—now working mostly on her own—comes into the office asking about definitions.

“I need help,” she says, “revising this definition on tribes and clans.”

“Meet with me tomorrow,” I say, “I’m busy today.”

She returns the next day, asking about definitions.

“What is the definition of *race*, she asks?”

“Ah,” I say, “I’ve been meaning to get to it.”

## 43.6

Somewhere amidst the hours of the week, at night, in my apartment, on my couch, I find time to dig through *The Code* and *Code 2*, looking particularly at the evolution of the US Census.

I jot down notes—

*Race*—

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*geographical*

*ethnic*

*cultural*

*medical*

*political*

*Race is a categorization process;  
as such, defining “race” is a project  
similar to defining other  
categorization terms, such as “color”,  
“region”, or “measurement” (What is  
measurement? What is color?).*

*Defining “race” requires reflection  
upon who is doing the defining.  
Each particular group, or discipline,*

*will have its own definition of this categorization process (each word has a particular meaning for each particular group that uses it).*

*Race is a word with a unique status—a status which has arisen as a result of the negative connotations attached to the word; ultimately, what we can say about the term “race” is that, no matter how useful it may have once been, that use is now, and will forever be (or, at least, until the foreseeable future) overshadowed by the horrors, prejudices, and simple confusions committed*

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*through its use. Yet words usually do not die out unless they are replaced; thus, until it is supplanted by a new concept, or a group of overlapping concepts, “race” will inevitably remain in use.*

*Our project here is to put forth possible replacements for this word: “gg-group”, designating “geographical gene-grouping”; “bs-group”, designating “bone-structure grouping”; and “sc-group”, designating “skin-color grouping.” The “gg-group”*

*will be derived using the techniques of population genetics. The “bs-group” will be derived using the techniques of forensic anthropology. The “sc-group” will be derived using the techniques of gene-pigment analysis.*

*To give an example: instead of saying, “Brian is White” and “Karen is Black”, we would say, “Brian Smith belongs to gg-group 1123, bs-group 323, and sc-group 24”; and “Karen Smith belongs to gg-group 434, bs-group 190, and sc-group 556”.*

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*Because it is new, this system of classification may seem unnatural and awkward (not to mention a mouthful); yet we can indeed imagine people in the future referring to each other not by their “race,” but instead by their bone-structure grouping, skin-color classification, and/or geographical gene-grouping. This practice would be no different than referring to one’s blood type (most people know their own blood type, and in some cultures blood type is even also*

*connected to personality); in a similar way, we can imagine these types of groupings benefiting the medical community (e.g., “People in gg-groups 906-1032 have a higher incidence of diabetes type 2”).*

*Yet, as a practical matter, beyond these types of scientific classifications, the word “race” will need to be replaced by words that can be used in everyday language. Though people often know their own blood type, we cannot expect these numerical classifications to likewise immediately take hold (e.g., “Say,*



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*Bob, my sc-group is 102. What's yours?"). It is more practical to work to develop corresponding words in plain language. This, then, is the fundamental problem we now face: what words can we create that will be used in everyday language, words that will correspond to the overlapping concepts of "geographical-gene group," "skin-color group," and "bone-structure group"?*

...

## 43.7

Doves cooing, trash-trucks—I  
wake with books stacked on my stomach,  
notes on the coffee table.

I stand, wash my face, shower,  
dress.

Checking my email, I see a note  
from Melanie:

*Mr. Gray,*

*According to their charter, ANS  
Charities is “Devoted to helping  
those in need.”*

*ANS is registered as both a  
501(c)(4) charity and a 527 group (26*

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*US Code). It is unclear which  
money goes where, but...*

Without finishing, I close the  
email. I walk out and down the hallway, to  
the lobby.

*No, I decide, she works for a  
charity—she is pure, uncorrupted.*

## **43.8**

Down and out the building,  
walking to the bus.

Coffee; then sitting in the square,  
waiting for her.

The weather is warm for the season.

After ten minutes or so, she comes, looking back, smiling—bright teeth and eyes contrasting with her dark skin.

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## 44.1

Carlos calls.

“I’m in town,” he says.

“Carlos!” I say, for some reason  
glad to hear his voice.

“Foxy—fuck yeah! Come get me, man—we should hang out.”

I leave work early, driving to his hotel, 14<sup>th</sup> Street.

## 44.2

I don't really know what month or year it is.

I go into work, and Rong is gone—now working for the LRC, rewriting *The Code*, transforming the negative into the positive.

Jessie is sitting in my old chair, behind my old desk, writing fixed definitions.

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She believes that meanings inhere—that the meanings of words never change, always ever staying the same. We've had countless arguments over this, but each always ends alike.

“It's not about philosophical linguistics,” she says, “it's about being practical—creating a fixed social contract. How else can it be a contract? You don't sign a deed unless you know that the meanings of the words in the contract won't change.”

At one point, in the middle of a discussion (an argument, really) I ask her if she believes in God—this startles her.

“What?” she asks.

“It’s a pretty straightforward question,” I say, “*do you believe in God*. Do you?”

“I—of course I do.”

“Alright,” I say, “that explains everything.”

At night, when I’m bored, I send her emails, fucking with her.

*How about this?* I write:

*H.R. 4051:*



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*American citizens need protection  
from online bullying and stalking.  
The following Bill works to curb  
predatory environments.*

*Define “bully”.*

*Bully is an expression from the  
early 1900s, meaning “Good  
job!”*

*Bully also means “pimp” or  
“honey.”*

We still meet with each other  
during the group meeting, on Wednesdays,  
and now and then I drop by her office,

visiting my old desk (it really is a great desk—I should've moved it into my new office), and sometimes we'll head down to the cafeteria together, but, really, overall, we don't get along very well. Each of us sees the other as stuck in the mud, unable to live in the real world (in Washington, living in the ideal world is seen as a character flaw).

## 44.3

On Saturdays, I drive down to Rock Creek Park, visiting Lyon in an old soldier's home. He sits in his room, or sometimes out on the lawn, holding his cane. Sometimes, we'll take a walk alongside the

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park, looking for boulders, hoping to see an unconformity. Lyon touches the rocks, talking to them, telling me their meanings.

When I see Marcus there, we don't really talk. Lyon, most of the time, is disoriented, forgetful, and—most of all—repetitive. He stands to go somewhere, then stops himself, sits, thinks—then starts the process all over again. He tells me the same stories, over and over again.

“There was a time,” he says, “when people like you and me—we couldn't vote.”

“People like who?” I ask.

He looks at me as if I'm crazy.

I've come to accept that I'm simply not able to see Lyon as a person—an individual; he will always be a shadow to me, a clouded figure, obscured by the generational distance between us.

#### 44.4

At night, unable to sleep, I go walking.

I end up across the river, Minnesota Avenue—but it's too dark to see anything.

My memory jogged, I come back in the morning.

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The sign is still here, but nothing has changed.

*FUTURE SITE OF CTE-1*

A man walking by sees me looking at the sign.

“What is this?” I ask him.

He shrugs.

“They’ve been talking about that for probably two, three years now,” he says. “But I don’t see no progress.”

Looking around the area, I notice a few houses boarded up, vacant.

“What about those?” I ask.

“What happened to the owners?”

He follows my gaze.

“Half of ‘em were bought up,” he says, “eminent domain.”

“And the other half?”

Again, he shrugs.

“Nobody here wants to live in a prison-town. Not if they don’t have to.”

“A *prison-town*?”

He nods.

“That’s what the billboard says, if you read the fine print.”

He smiles at me.

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“People like them,” he says, pointing to the boarded-up windows, “can afford to leave. The rest of us have to stay.”

“Why don’t you—call up your councilmember or something?”

A look flashes across his eyebrows—as if I am a child.

“They’re part of it,” he says, “They all get money out of it. Poverty pimps.”

I look closely at the man: he in his fifties, dressed in jeans, a jacket, boots.

Suddenly, I want to know all about him: *What does he do for a living?*

*How long has he lived here? How many children does he have?*

But fast, he is gone, walking down the sidewalk, and I'm unable to muster enough courage to follow him.

#### 44.5

"Same old Foxy," says Carlos.

"Same old Jackal."

We drink beer and eat burgers, talking and bullshitting, reminiscing.

Smoke drifts in through the front door, a crowd of drunks standing outside laughing.



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But it's not quite the same as before; now, we seem to be going through the motions, reliving old memories that have already been relived; memories that are now downtrodden, boring.

"What're you in town for?" I ask, trying to steer away from the past.

"Some bullshit conference," he hedges.

"For what?"

"For—bullshit," he laughs.

The music grows louder; we raise our voices.

"But for what?"

And, for a moment, a cloud  
passes across his brow—*he's ashamed*, I  
think to myself.

“No, actually,” he says, looking at  
the bar, at me, “I’m here because...”

And, like that, the past is gone—  
he makes his pitch, lobbying, and becomes  
like all the rest, a face in the crowd.

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**45.1**

Leaving DC, a cloud lifts from  
my mind.

Driving north (I always drive), I see the roads open, the vast landscape spread out before me.

You can look for symbols anywhere and find them. DC was a perfect 10-by-10 square, cut off because of competition in slave trade between Alexandria and Georgetown; DC lies directly on the fall line, separating the hard Piedmont from the soft loam, the industrial culture from the agrarian culture; DC is both Federal and State; DC is North and South; black and white—but, really, all those symbols, those categorizations, those definitions, tell us

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more about the person creating them than anything else.

Whenever I leave the city, driving up to the island, I feel these symbols dissipating from my thoughts like so much dust. I see DC as only a town, a small part of the whole.

## 45.2

Law school, college—those were the early years of indoctrination. Sure, I was allowed to question things, to offer my own interpretations and variations; but those were only steps along the way toward the ultimate aim.

Because a person can never be fully assimilated unless they are allowed first to question doctrine. A priest is not a priest unless he or she first undergoes a crisis of faith; that way, the questions are brought out into the open—managed, twisted, conformed. It is those students who keep their questions to themselves—developing in time their own answers—that are the most troubling to the established order.

### 45.3

*Goddamnit, I think to myself,  
driving, you spend too much time, Fox,  
thinking to yourself—too much damn time*

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*self-reflecting and self-analyzing. You need to live!*

At a scenic overlook, I pull over and get out of the car, determined to stand and gaze out over the world. But the sky is too cloudy, and I can't see a damn thing, except the guardrail and a woman pulling her dog from her minivan, taking the animal into the tall grass to squat and defecate.

I turn on the radio, but I can't listen to any of the songs — *what the hell are they singing about?* I wonder, making myself feel old. *When did all of these singers become so damn young?*

I flip around to talk stations, but all they talk about is politics and religion—I want none of that, leave me alone.

The wind coming in through the open window feels nice against the side of my face.

## 45.4

High school, elementary school—the time to create my soft-shell. I had no idea who I was, or who I wanted to be. I only knew that I didn't really much like the way other people looked at me. To me, at that point in life, looking was an important



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thing. Photography, I suppose, was connected to all that.

## 45.5

*God*, I think to myself, driving up into the country, *how nice it would be to live outside of culture—outside of civilization. To be able to live without words—what a wonderful thing!* Deeper and deeper I go, rising up into the Great North, passing the last of the cities. Only towns now, villages, hamlets. Little places on the side of the road.

I stop to get gas, walking into the convenience store, looking over the local

newspaper. The top news story is about the local high school football team losing in the playoffs. I purchase a copy, reading a few pages in my car, sitting out in the parking lot.

*This is meaning, I think, all of this.*

## 45.6

The middle years, eight, nine, ten, eleven, we were moving, always moving from one place to the next. I was living with my cousins, then somewhere else. The suburbs, the country. In the background, somewhere, the city.

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I just wanted—all I really  
wanted—was for us, my mother  
and I, to be left alone to live.  
Why was that so hard?

## 45.7

A toddler, I spent my hours  
looking at picture-books, distorted imitations  
of reality.

Crows painted in watercolors,  
perched in trees come alive.

“We are quite content,” said the  
crows.

“You do us a disservice,” said the  
trees.

Telephone wires cut diagonal  
lines.

## 45.8

Then, there—around the corner,  
the ocean appears—*at last!*

I breathe in deep, sucking the air  
into my lungs, allowing my eyes to moisten.

I want no part of the past, of  
memories.

I want no part of meanings—of  
definitions—symbols.

I want no home—I have none.

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I want only to eat—to sleep—to experience things as they are, away from humans.

I park my car, walking into the terminal, buying my ticket.

Then the ferry comes, and I walk to the front of the line, boarding.

And, slowly, the boat begins backing out, turning, and moving forward, out into the ocean. Wind blows, pushing the fog aside.

I was born, I was told, into a closed environment—an incubator, two months premature. From human womb to human-made womb.

They tied me to tubes and wires, placed me on a special heated blanket, put a plastic dome over my body.

Wittgenstein had words with St. Augustine, who believed that children picked up language one word at a time, through adults pointing (to the outside world, to ideas). No, said Wittgenstein, language doesn't quite work that way. Meaning is not about representation, but about use—games (a game is a *sphere of context*). Language is

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about family resemblance. We live  
surrounded by a language environment,  
gradually absorbing relationships, the uses of  
words as (un)connected to the world.

What must I have looked like,  
leaving the womb—covered in blood, a tiny  
little thing, the size of a small eggplant!

I was silent, they say—quiet for  
nearly six months, making nary a peep nor a  
wail.

I don't remember any of it.